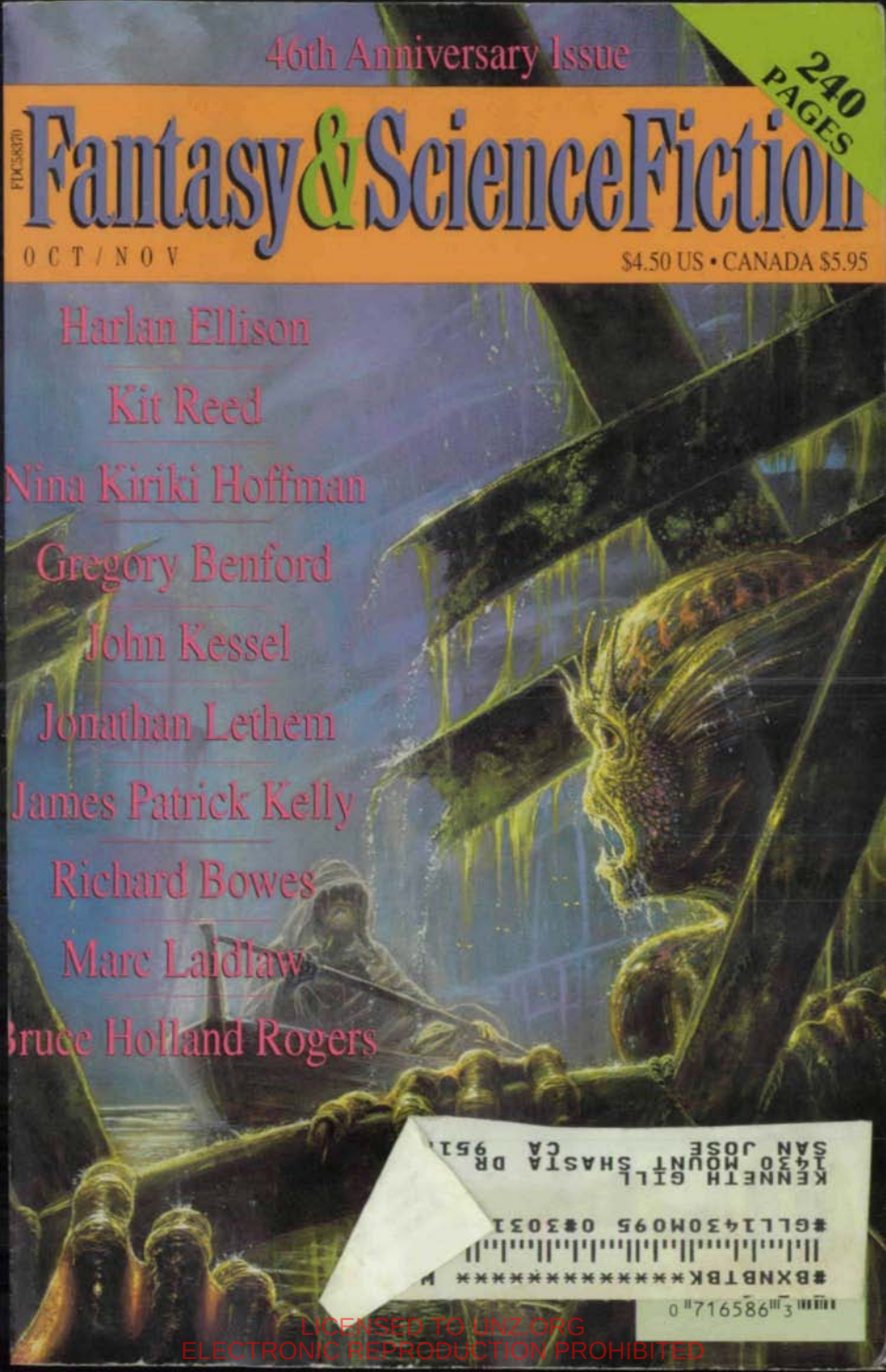

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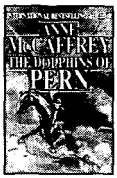

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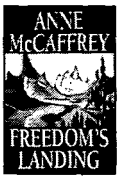

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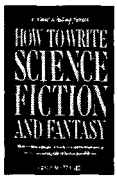

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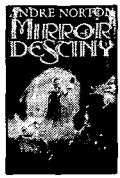

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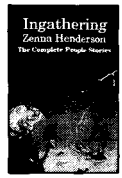

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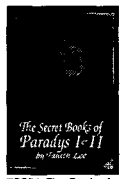

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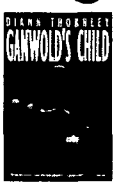

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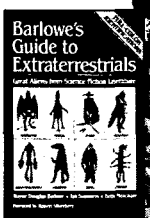

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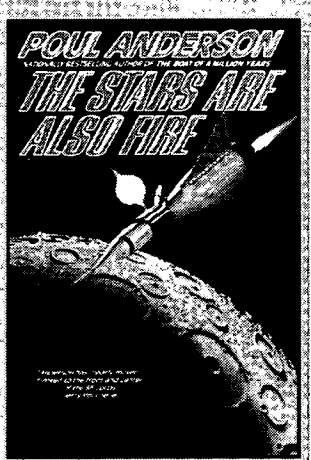

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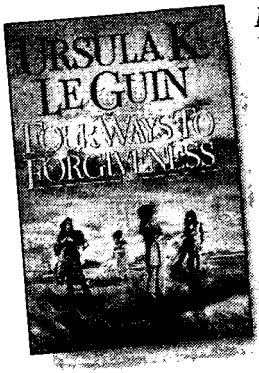

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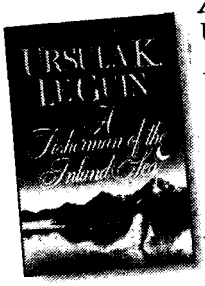

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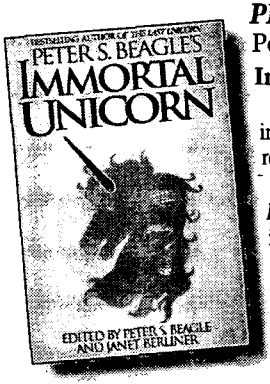

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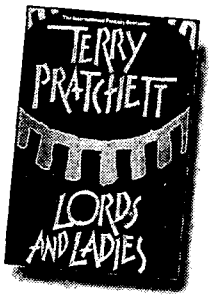

Who in this world, or any other for that matter, would write a novel about a football team that falls victim to a group of wily elves? Here's a hint: *The New York Review of Science Fiction* said he "... is the funniest parodist working in the field today, period." Here's another hint: He is the #1 bestselling author in England. Well, if you haven't guessed yet, or read one of the 8 million copies of his *Discworld* novels, the answer is Terry Pratchett.

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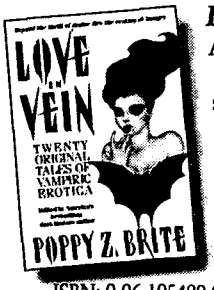

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

I LOVE THE way the world has become the imagined science fictional landscape of my childhood.

In late May, my husband, two friends from Wisconsin, and I were driving into Portland after a holiday on the Oregon Coast. We were planning to hit a few bookstores, do some sightseeing, and have an expensive dinner when suddenly my husband Dean (a former professional golfer) and my friend Paul (a recent golf convert) cried out in unison. At a strip mall, already a block behind us, they had seen a sign (a Sign?) which read VIRTUAL GOLF. Dean executed a hasty U-turn across six lanes and drove into the bumpy parking lot of a late sixties strip mall. At the far end, in what should have been a logo for an insurance office, was a hand-painted red banner advertising virtual golf.

We got out of the car (which you need to know (to make this picture complete) was a 1990 mini-van, the kind with the sloping front end, the kind known as a Space Van) and we approached the door. The sales window was covered with blackout paper, as was the door's glass. We couldn't see inside. We debated whether or not to leave, the two non-golfers (Beth and I) considerably more willing to forgo the adventure than the golfers. Finally we decided we'd spend five minutes, five minutes *only*, and we pushed open the door —

— and stepped into every magic shop story that we had ever read, written by authors from Charles Dickens to Ray Bradbury to William F. Wu. The interior was dark, dusty and a tad too hot. Papers were scattered everywhere, and the furniture was clearly temporary. A middle-aged man, his suitcoat on the back of his chair, tie loose and shirt wrinkled, stood and held out his hand, welcoming us to the world of Virtual Golf.

A reedy white-haired man of indeterminate age stood on a green carpet, two iron poised over a real golf ball. A computer hummed from

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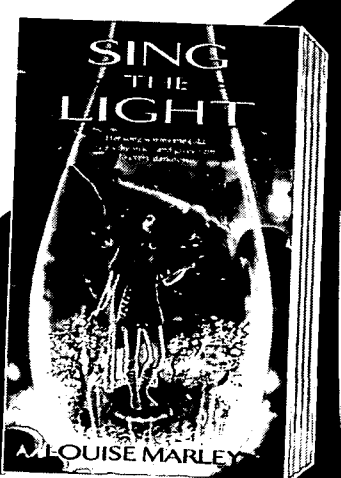

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a table in front of him. To his side was a wide screen with a reproduction of the seventeenth hole at Pebble Beach. He swung his club back and whacked the ball ("nice form," my husband said). It hit the screen, and I prepared to duck from the ricochet, when the real ball seemed to disappear, and a simulated ball flew over the simulated course, bounced twice, and disappeared into a simulated bunker in front of the simulated green.

The golfers groaned, already in the illusion.

"First mistake you made all day," the shopkeeper said.

"On Pebble," the player said. "On St. Andrews, I double bogeyed the Road Hole."

A simulated breeze whipped a simulated flag at the simulated hole on the simulated golf course. I could almost feel the wind in my hair. To dispel the illusion, I looked for the real golf ball. It had landed along the edge of the screen. Apparently the screen itself had absorbed the force, preventing the ricochet and destruction I had expected.

The golfers went and talked with the player, a retired doctor who spent his afternoons in the shop practicing his swing while his wife went to the beauty parlor next door. Beth examined the computer, and I talked to the shop owner.

Only he wasn't an owner, and this wasn't a store. If we wanted to wait, we could play the simulation for free. The man actually had a book of coupons which he was selling. He planned to use the Virtual Golf simulation to help high schools. They would rent the Virtual Golf equipment at a minimal price, sell coupons, and the grown-ups would play, with the profits going to the band or the football team or the pep squad.

Sure beat the band candy nightmares of my youth.

As the doctor stepped aside to allow Dean and Paul some time on Pebble Beach, I learned even more. The storefront existed to show people the technology. The salesman spent his nights there, working with school board members, parents and school officials, showing them how the game worked. Beth interrupted with questions about the computer, then we all interrupted the game to view the doctor's playing history (dutifully recorded by the computer each time he took a swing), and the conversation deteriorated into birdies, bogeys, and the perfect lie.

And, just like in the old stories, for each minute we spent inside, five ticked away in the real world. When we left, the van remained, but the parking lot was nearly empty. I tucked the man's card into my purse for use

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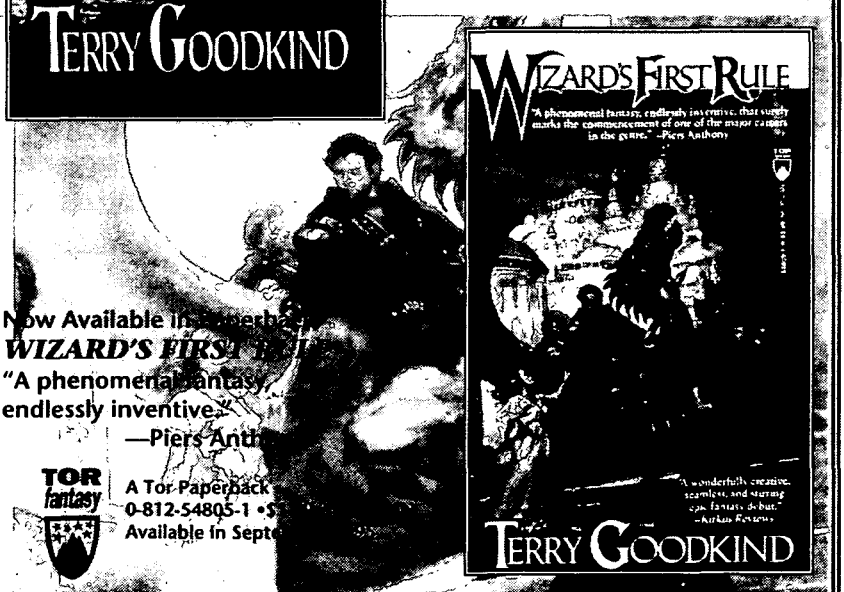
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in a future editorial, and we drove away.

This morning, before I sat down to write, I searched for the card. It is, of course, gone. There is no listing for Virtual Golf in the Portland telephone directory, and I somehow doubt we could ever find the strip mall again.

These missing details only serve to delight me more. Virtual golf is a reality, like Space vans, flying cloverleaf freeways, and telephones so small they can fit in the heel of a shoe. Yet that afternoon, the presentation reminded me how fantastic all this change is. In the world of my birth, golf had been aired on television for only five years. Television itself was only in 65 percent of homes, and those homes were lucky to watch the programs in black-and-white.

It isn't just the technological innovations in entertainment that have changed the world. It's computers, and fax machines, and microwave ovens. It's the improvements in medicine and food technology, and vaccines. In 1963, my two-month-old nephew died from a condition that can be surgically repaired now. The great Polio scares of the 1950s exist only in the history books.

These changes have altered our lives in such great degrees that we never think about the change any more. Last week, my sister had to remind me that I could print out, fold, envelope, and stamp the e-mail letters that had failed to cross the gateway to her e-mail address. The Post Office, she had said with only a bit of sarcasm, still exists.

So every now and then, it's nice to find a little corner of the world where fiction and reality intersect, a magical place that exists only for a moment, a place Rod Serling gave name to. It's nice to be reminded that the world of today existed in the imagination only yesterday. It's nice too to get a glimpse of the landscape of tomorrow.

Years from now, Paul, Beth, Dean, and I will sit around reminiscing about the first time we saw Virtual Golf, how outdated the technology was, and how wondrous we found it. And then we'll go out and find breaking technology in the shell of a decaying '90s superstore, somewhere on the edge of town.

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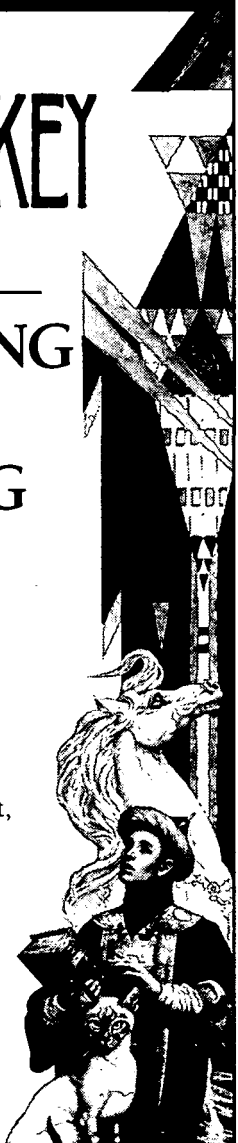

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Bruce Holland Rogers has published over fifty short stories in such diverse markets as Full Spectrum 4, Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, *and* The Quarterly. *In 1989, he won first prize in the Writers of the Future contest for a dark fantasy story, and in 1994, his mystery story, "Enduring as Dust," was nominated for an Edgar. His first story for* The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction *is science fiction with a considerable bite.*

Lifeboat on a Burning Sea

By Bruce Holland Rogers

DESERTERS.

When I can't see the next step, when I can't think clearly about the hardware changes that TOS needs in order to become the repository, the ark, the salva-tion of my soul, I think of deserters.

I think of men on the rail of a sinking tanker. For miles around, there are no lights, only water black and icy. A lake of flame surrounds the ship. Beyond the edge of the burning oil slick, a man sits in the lifeboat looking at his comrades. The angle of the deck grows steeper. The men at the rail are waving their hands, but the one in the boat doesn't return. Instead, he puts his back into rowing, rowing away. To the men who still wave, who still hope, the flames seem to reach higher, but it's really the ship coming down to meet the burning sea.

Or this:

The arctic explorer wakes from dreams of ice and wind to a world of ice and wind. In the sleeping bag, his frostbite has thawed and it feels as though

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his hands and feet are on fire. It is almost more than he can endure, but he tells himself he's going to live. As long as his companion is fit enough to drive the sled, he's going to live. He hobbles from the tent, squints against the sunlight. When he finds the dogs and sled gone, he watches for a long time as the wind erases the tracks.

In these fantasies of mine, the dead bear witness.

From the bottom of the sea, dead sailors wave their arms.

Frozen into the ice, a leathery finger points, accuses.

There must have been a time when I wasn't aware of the relentless tick of every heartbeat, but I don't remember it. My earliest memory is of lying awake in my bed, eyes open in the blackness, imagining what it was like to be dead.

I had asked my father. He was a practical man.

"It's like this," he said. He showed me a watch that had belonged to my grandfather, an antique watch that ran on a coiled spring instead of a battery. He wound it up. "Listen," he said.

Tick, tick, tick, I heard.

"Our hearts are like that," he said, handing me the watch. "At last, they stop. That's death."

"And *then* what?"

"Then, nothing," he told me. "Then we're dead. We just aren't any more — no thought, no feeling. Gone. Nothing."

He let me carry the watch around for a day. The next morning, the spring had run down. I put the watch to my ear, and heard *absence*, heard *nothing*.

Even back then, lying awake in the dark with my thoughts of the void, I was planning my escape.

Tick, tick, tick, went my heart, counting down to zero.

I wasn't alone. After my graduate work in neuronics, I found a university job and plenty of projects to work on, but research is a slow business.

Tick, tick, tick.

I was in a race, and by the time I was fifty-six, I knew I was falling behind. In fact, I felt lucky to have made it that far. We were living at the height of terrorist chic. The Agrarian Underground and Monetarists were in decline, but the generation of bombers that succeeded them was ten times as active, a hundred times as random in their selection of targets. Plastique, Flame,

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Implosion.... They gave themselves rock-band names. And then there were the ordinary street criminals who would turn their splitter guns on you in the hope that your chip, once they dug it out of your skin, would show enough credit for a hit of whatever poison they craved.

Statistically, of course, it wasn't surprising that I was still alive. But whenever I tuned in to CNN Four, The Street Beat Source, the barrage of just-recorded carnage made me wonder that *anyone* was still alive.

Fifty-six. That's when I heard from Bierley's people. And after I had met Bierley, after I had started to work with Richardson, I began to believe that I would hit my stride in time, that Death might not be quite the distance runner he'd always been cracked up to be.

I had known who Bierley was, of course. Money like his bought a high profile, if you wanted it. And I had heard of Richardson. He was hot stuff in analog information.

Bierley and Richardson were my best hope. Bierley and Richardson were magicians at what they did. And Bierley and Richardson — I knew it from the start — were unreliable.

Bierley, with his money and political charm, would stay with the project only until it bored him. And Richardson, he had his own agenda. Even when we were working well together, when we were making progress, Richardson never really *believed*.

In Richardson's office, he and I watched a playback of Bierley's press conference. It had been our press conference, too, but we hadn't answered many questions. Even Richardson understood the importance of leaving that to Bierley.

"A multi-cameral multi-phasic analog information processor," Bierley said again on the screen, "but we prefer to call it TOS." He smiled warmly. "The Other Side."

From behind his desk, Richardson grumbled, "God. He makes what we've done sound like a séance."

"Come on," I said. "It's the whole point."

"Are you really so hot to live forever as a machine consciousness, if, fantasy of fantasies, it turns out to be possible?"

"Yes."

"Your problem," he said, pointing a finger, "is that you're too damned scared of death to be curious about it. That's not a very scientific attitude."

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I almost told him he'd feel differently in another twenty years, but then I didn't. It might not be true. Since I had *always* seen death as the enemy, it was possible that someone like Richardson *never* would.

"Meanwhile," Richardson continued, "we've made a significant leap in machine intelligence. Isn't that worthy of attention in its own right without pretending that it's a step toward a synthesized afterlife?"

On the screen, Bierley was saying, "Of all the frontiers humanity has challenged, death was the one we least expected to conquer."

"As if, Christ, as if we'd already *done* it!"

Bierley peered out from the screen. He had allowed only one video camera for the conference so that he'd know when he was looking his viewers in the eye. "Some of you watching now will never die. That's the promise of this research. Pioneers of the infinite! Who doesn't long to see the march of the generations? What will my grandchild's grandchildren be like? What lies ahead in one hundred years? A thousand? A million?" After a pause and another grandfatherly smile, a whisper: "Some will live to know."

Richardson blew a raspberry at the screen.

"All right," I admitted. "He oversells. But that's Bierley. Everything he says is for effect, and the effect is *funding*!"

On the screen, the silver-haired Bierley was rephrasing questions as only he could, turning the more aggressive queries in on themselves. Wasn't this a premature announcement *of a breakthrough bringing hope to millions*? Would Bierley himself turn a profit from this *conquest of humanity's oldest and cruelest foe*? Would he himself be among the first *to enter the possibly hazardous territory of eternity to make sure it was safe for others*?

Then he was introducing us, telling the reporters about my genius for hardware and Richardson's for analog information theory. We had sixty technicians and research assistants working with us, but Bierley made it sound like a two-man show. In some ways, it was. Neither of us could be replaced, not if you wanted the same synergy.

"Two great minds in a race for immortality," Bierley said, and then he gave them a version of what I'd told Bierley myself: Richardson was always two steps ahead of my designs, seeing applications that exceeded my intentions, making me run to keep up with him and propose new structures that would then propel him another two steps beyond me. I'd never worked with anyone who stimulated me in that way, who made me leap and stretch. It felt like flying.

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What Bierley didn't say was that often we'd dash from thought to thought and finally look down to see empty air beneath us. Usually we discovered impracticalities in the wilder things we dreamed up together. Only rarely did we find ourselves standing breathless on solid ground, looking back at the flawless bridge we had just built. Of course, when that happened, it was magnificent.

It also frightened me. I worried that Richardson was indispensable, that after making those conceptual leaps with him, I could never go back to my solitary plodding or to working with minds less electric than his. *All* minds were less electric than his, at least when he was at his best. The only difficulty was keeping him from straying into the Big Questions.

The camera had pulled back, and Richardson and I both looked rumpled and plain next to Bierley's polish. On screen I stammered and adjusted my glasses as I answered a question.

Richardson was no longer watching the press conference video, but had shifted his gaze to the flatscreen on his office wall. It showed a weather satellite image of the western hemisphere, time lapsed so that the last 72 hours rolled by in three minutes. It was always running in Richardson's office, the only decoration there, unless you counted that little statue, the souvenir from India that he kept on his desk.

On the press conference tape, Richardson was answering a question. "We don't have any idea how we'd actually get a person's consciousness into the machine," he admitted. "We haven't even perfected the artificial mind that we've built. There's one significant glitch that keeps shutting us down for hours at a time."

At that point, Bierley's smile looked forced, but only for an instant.

"The best way to explain the problem," the recorded Richardson continued, "is to tell you that thoughts move through our hardware in patterns that are analogous to weather. Sometimes an information structure builds up like a tropical depression. If conditions are right, it becomes a hurricane. The processor continues to work, but at greatly reduced efficiency until the storm passes. So we're blacked out sometimes. We can't talk to..." He paused, looking at Bierley, sort of wincing, "...to TOS, until the hurricane has spent its energy."

"You don't like the name," I said in Richardson's office.

Richardson snorted. "The Other Side." He leaned back in his chair.

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"You're right about the money, though. He charms the bucks out of Congress, and that's not easy these days."

On the tape, I was telling the reporters about the warning lights I had rigged in the I/O room: They ran up a scale from Small Craft Advisory to Gale Warning to Hurricane, with the appropriate nautical flags painted onto the display. I had hoped for a bigger laugh than I got.

"Can we interview the computer?" a reporter asked.

I had started to say something about how the I/O wasn't up to that yet, but that TOS itself was helping to design an appropriate interface to make itself as easy to talk to as any human being.

Bierley's image stepped forward in front of mine. "TOS is *not* a computer," he said. "Let's make this clear. TOS is an information structure for machine intelligence. TOS is interfaced with computers, can access and manipulate digital data, but this is an analog machine. Eventually, it will be a repository for human consciousness. If you want another name for it, you could call it a Mind Bank."

"No one gets it," Richardson said, "and this press conference isn't going to help." He looked at me. "*You* don't get it, do you, Maas?"

"I don't even know what you're talking about."

"Trying to synthesize self-awareness is an interesting project. And putting human consciousness into a box would be a neat trick, instructive. I mean, I'm all for trying even if we fail. I expect to fail. Even if we succeed, even if we find a *technical* answer, it begs the bigger question."

"Which is?"

"What does it *mean* to live? What does it *mean* to die? Until you get a satisfactory answer to that, then what's the point of trying to live forever?"

"The point is that I don't want to die!" Then more quietly, I said, "Do you?"

Richardson didn't look at me. He picked up the Indian statue from his desk and leaned back in his chair to look at it. When he put it down again, he still hadn't answered.

The statue was a man dancing inside an arc of flames.

The next week, Bierley deserted us.

"Brain aneurism in his sleep," one of the old man's attorneys told me via video link.

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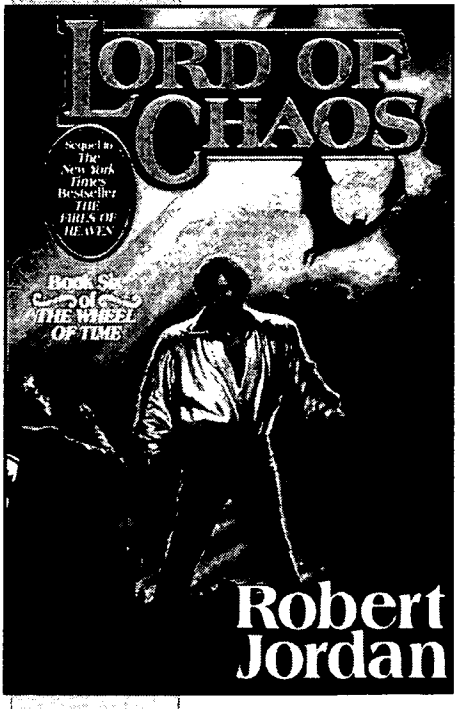

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There had been no provision in Bierley's will to keep seed money coming. If he went first, we were on our own. The attorney zapped me a copy of the will so I could see for myself.

"Makes you think," the attorney said, "doesn't it?" He meant the sudden death. I thought about that, of course. As strong as ever, I could hear my pulse in my throat. Tick, tick, tick. But I was also thinking something else:

Bastard. *Deserter.*

He had left me to die.

WEEKS LATER in the I/O room, I said to Richardson, "We're in trouble."

He and a technician had been fiddling with TOS's voice, and he said, "TOS, what do you think of that?"

"I don't know what to think of it," said the machine voice. The tone was as meaningfully modulated as any human voice, but there was still something artificial about the sound — too artificial, still, for press exposure. "I don't know enough of what Dr. Maas means by 'trouble.' I'm unsure of just how inclusive 'we' is intended to be."

"My bet," Richardson said, "is that he's going to say our project has funding shortfalls up the yaya."

"Yaya?" said TOS.

"Wazoo," Richardson said.

"Oh." A pause. "I understand."

Richardson grinned at me. "English as she is spoke."

I waved off his joke. "There's talk of cutting our funding in Congress. I've been calling the reps that were in Bierley's pocket, but I can't talk to these people. Not like he could. And I sure as hell can't start a grass-roots ground swell."

"How about that lobbyist we hired?"

"She's great at phoning, full of enthusiasm, to tell me how bad things are. She says she's doing her best." I dropped into a chair. "Damn Bierley for dying." And for taking us with him, I thought. Didn't those bastards in Washington understand what the stakes were here? This wasn't basic science that you could throw away when budgets were tight. This was life and death!

Tick, tick, tick.

My life. *My* death!

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Richardson said, "How desperate are we?"

"Plenty."

"Good." Richardson smiled. "I have a desperation play."

We played it close to the edge. Our funding was cut in a House vote, saved by the Senate, and lost again in conference committee. Two weeks later, we also lost an accountant who said he wouldn't go to jail for us, but by then we had figured out that the best way to float digital requisition forms and kite electronic funds transfers was with TOS. We couldn't stay ahead of the numbers forever, but TOS, with near-human guile and digital speed, bought us an extra week or two while the team from Hollywood installed the new imaging hardware.

The technicians and research assistants kept TOS busy with new data to absorb, to *think about*, and I worked to add "rooms" to the multi-cameral memory, trying to give TOS the ability to suppress the information hurricanes that still shut us down at unpredictable intervals. The first rooms had each been devoted to a specific function — sensory processing, pattern recognition, memory sorting — but these new ones were basically just memory modules. Meanwhile, Richardson paraded people who had known Bierley through the I/O room for interviews with TOS.

The day of the press conference, I deflected half a dozen calls from the Government Accounting Office. Even as the first reporters were filing into our press room, I kept expecting some suits and crewcuts to barge in, flash badges, and say, "FBI."

I also worried about hurricanes, but TOS's storm warning lights stayed off all morning, and the only surprise of the press conference was the one Richardson and I had planned. While stragglers were still filing into the room — security-screening and bomb-sniffing that many people took some time — the video behind the podium flicked on.

"Bierley, regrettably, *is dead*," said Bierley's image. He was responding to the first question after his prepared statement. "There's no bringing him back, and I regret that." Warm smile.

The press corps laughed uncertainly.

"But you're his memories?" asked a reporter.

"Not in the sense that you mean it," Bierley said. "Nobody dumped

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Bierley's mind into a machine. We can't do that." Dramatic pause. "Yet." Smile. "What I am is a personality construct of *other* people's memories. Over one hundred of Bierley's closest associates were interviewed by TOS. Their impressions of Bierley, specific examples of things he had said and done, along with digital recordings of the man in action, were processed to create me. I may not be Jackson Bierley as he saw himself, but I'm Jackson Bierley as he was seen by others."

Bierley chose another reporter by name.

The reporter looked around herself, then at the screen. "Can you see me?" she said. "Can you see this room?"

"There's a micro camera," said the image, "top and center of this display panel. Really, though — " he flashed the grandfatherly Bierley smile " — that's a wasted question. You must have had a harder one in mind."

"Just this," she said. "Are you self-aware?"

"I certainly seem to be, don't I?" said the image. "There's liable to be some debate about that. I'm no expert, so I'll leave the final answer up to Doctors Maas and Richardson. But my opinion is that, no, I am not self-aware."

A ripple of laughter from the reporters who appreciated paradox.

"How do we know," said a man who hadn't laughed, "that this isn't some kind of fake?"

"How do you know I'm not *some incredibly talented actor who's wearing undetectable makeup and who studied Jackson Bierley's every move for years in order to be this convincing*?" Undetectably, unless you were looking for it, Bierley's pupils dilated a bit, and the effect was to broadcast warmth and openness. We had seen the real Bierley do that in recorded addresses. "I guess you have to make up your own mind."

Then he blinked. He smiled. Jackson Bierley didn't intend to make a fool of anyone, not even a rude reporter.

"What does Bierley's family think of all this?" asked someone else.

"You could ask them. I can tell you that they cooperated — they were among those interviewed by TOS. They have me back to an extent. I'll be here to meet those great-great grandchildren I so longed to greet one day. Unfortunately..." and suddenly he looked sad. "Unfortunately, those kids will know Bierley, but Bierley won't know them. Only much more research can hold out the promise that one day, a construct like me really will be self-aware, will remember, will *be* the man or woman whose life he or she extends into eternity."

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He didn't mention the licensing fee his family was charging us for the exclusive use of his image, any more than Bierley himself would have mentioned it.

"Are the Bierleys funding this project?"

"I know a billion sounds like a lot of money, but when it's divided up among as many heirs as I have..." He paused, letting the laughter die. "No. They are not. This project is more expensive than you can imagine. In the long run, it's going to take moon-shot money to get eternity up and running."

"And where's that money going to come from, now that your federal funds have been cut off?"

"Well, I can't really say much about that. But I'll tell you that it will be much easier for me to learn Japanese or Malay as a construct than it would have been for the real Jackson Bierley." He smiled, but there was a brief tremor to the smile, and it didn't take a genius to see that Jackson Bierley, personality construct or not, was one American who didn't want to hand yet another technological advantage across the Pacific.

"In these times, it's understandable that the American taxpayer wants his money spent on hiring police," Bierley went on. "Why think about eternal life when you're worried about getting home from work alive? It's too bad that *both* can't be a priority. Of course, with the appropriate hardware attached, a machine like TOS could be one hell of a security system — a very smart guard who never sleeps." As if a TOS system could one day be in everyone's home.

Richardson and I stepped to the podium then, and for once I was happy to have no public speaking skills. The Bierley construct jumped in with damage control whenever I was about to say something I shouldn't. He made jokes when Richardson dryly admitted that in all honesty, the construct was closer to a collaborative oil painting than it was to the real Jackson Bierley. Of the three of us up on the platform, the one who seemed warmest, funniest, most human, was the one inside the video screen.

After the conference, we got calls from the Secretary of Commerce, the Speaker of the House, and both the Majority and Minority Leaders in the Senate. Even though they were falling all over themselves to offer support for funding, Richardson and I knew we could still screw it up, so we mostly listened in while the Bierley construct handled the calls.

It was Richardson who had pulled our fat out of the fire, but even I was caught up in the illusion. I felt grateful to *Bierley*.

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* * *

Once we'd restored our funding, I expected things to return to normal. I thought Richardson would be eager to get back to work, but he wouldn't schedule meetings with me. Day after day, he hid out in his office to tie up what he said were "loose ends."

I tried to be patient, but finally I'd had enough.

"It's time you talked to me," I said as I jerked open his office door. I stormed up to his desk. "You've been stalling for two weeks. This project is supposed to be a collaboration!"

Without looking up from his phone screen, he said, "Come in," which was supposed to be funny.

"Richardson," I told him, not caring who he might be talking to, "you were brilliant. You pulled off a coup. Great! Now let's get back to work. I can sit in my office and dream up augmentations for TOS all day, but it doesn't mean squat if I'm not getting your feedback."

"Have a seat."

"I'd prefer to stand, damn it. We're funded. We're ready to go. Let's get something *done*!"

He looked up at last and said, "I'm not a careerist, Maas. I'm not motivated by impressing anyone."

"And I am?" I sat down, tried to catch his eye. "I want to get to work for my own reasons, all right? The Bierley construct is incredible. Now what can we do next?"

"What indeed?"

"Yes," said the voice of Jackson Bierley. "I'm going to be a pretty hard trick to top, especially once you've got me in 3-D." The phone screen was at an acute angle and hard for me to see, but now I noticed the silver hair.

"Is that it?" I said. "You spend your day on the phone, chatting with the construct?"

Richardson said, "Bye, Jackson," and disconnected. "The construct is interesting. This is a useful tool we've invented."

"It is," I agreed. "It's something we can build on."

"It's something lots of people can build on." He folded the phone screen down. "A week ago I got a call from a Hollywood agent. He wanted to talk to me about some ideas. Constructs for dead singers — they could not only do new recordings, but grant interviews. Dead actor constructs. TOS-generated

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films scripted by dead writers and directed by Hitchcock or Huston or Spielberg or any other dead director you'd care to name. TOS is getting so good at imaging, you'd never need to build a set or hire a vid crew."

"Is *that* what you've spent all this time on?"

"Of course not. It's a good idea from the agent's perspective — as he sees it, he'd represent all of the virtual talent and practically own Hollywood. But it sounds to me like a waste of resources."

"Good."

"I'm just pointing out that everybody who hears about what TOS can do will see it in terms of meeting his or her own needs. The agent sees dead stars. You see a stepping stone to immortality. I see a tool for making my own inquiries."

"What inquiries?"

"We've had that discussion." He pointed at his wall. "They've always had a better handle on it than we have."

I looked where he was pointing, but just saw the usual time-lapse satellite image of weather systems crossing the globe. Then I realized that something was different. The display wasn't of the western hemisphere, but of the eastern.

Richardson picked up the statue on his desk. "Shiva," he said. "This arc of flames that surrounds him is life and death. Flames for life. Spaces between the flames for death. The one and the zero. Reincarnation."

For once it was my turn to be the skeptic. "You find that consoling? An afterlife that can't be verified? It's superstition, Richardson."

"It's religion," he said, "and I don't have any more faith than you do that I'll be reborn after I die. Maybe I don't *dis*believe it as much as you do. Since it can't be falsified, it's not subject to any scientific test. But as a metaphor, I find it fascinating."

"What are you talking about?"

"Maas, what if you really *knew* death? What if you and death were intimate?"

"I still don't follow you."

"You're so interested in synthetic consciousness. What about synthesized death? If you knew more about death, Maas, would you still have this unreasoning fear of it?"

I snapped, "What do you mean, 'unreasoning'?"

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"Forget it. I guess it's not your cup of tea. Why don't you think about this instead: Could a TOS construct replace you?"

"Replace me?"

"The way we replaced Bierley. The Bierley construct works for us every bit as well as the original did. So what about you? If I built a Maas construct, could it work on augmenting TOS as well as you do? It could sound like you, it could interact with other people convincingly, but could it think like you, design like you?"

"I don't know," I said. "I doubt it. A construct mimics social impressions. The pattern of thought that produces the behavior in the construct isn't sequenced quite like the thought in our heads. But you know that. Hell, what are you asking me for? You're the information expert."

"Well, if the behavior is the same, if the behavior is the production of good ideas, then maybe all we'd have to do is teach the machine to go through the motions that produce that behavior. We'd get the construct to act out whatever it is that you do when you're producing a good idea. Maybe it would kick out quality results as a sort of by-product."

I chewed my lip. "I don't think so."

"Works with Bierley."

"That's social skills. Not the same."

"You doubt the machine intelligence is sufficiently sophisticated, right?" Richardson said. "You're investing all this hope in TOS as a repository of consciousness, but you're not sure that we can even *begin* to synthesize creative thinking.

"Bierley makes for some interesting speculation," he went on. "Don't you think so? The original is dead. Jackson Bierley, in that sense, is complete. What we're left with is our memories of him. That's what we keep revising. And isn't that always true?

"My father died fifteen years ago," he said, "and I still feel as though my relationship with him changes from year to year. A life is like a novel that burns as you read it. You read the last page, and it's complete. You think about it, then, reflect on the parts that puzzle you. You feel some loss because there aren't any pages left to turn. You can remember only so many of the pages. That's what the construct is good for — remembering pages."

He smiled. "And here's the metaphysics: While you're trying to remember the book that's gone, maybe the author is writing a new one."

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He put the statue of Shiva down on his desk. "Give me some more time, Maas. I'm not sitting on my hands, I promise you that. I'm working on my perspective."

"Your perspective."

"That's what I said."

I exhaled sharply. "I've been thinking about your suggestion that we tie building security into TOS. I could do that. And I guess I could work on getting rid of the hurricanes once and for all. But that's not just a hardware problem."

"All right. I'll give you an hour a day on that. Okay?"

I didn't tell him what I really thought. If I thoroughly pissed him off, who knew how long it would take for us to get back to our real work? I said, "Get your perspective straight in a week."

In a week, he was gone.

One of the research assistants, somewhat timidly, brought me the news. She had been watching CNN Four and saw a bombing story across town, and she was certain that she had seen Philip Richardson among the dead.

She followed me into my office, where I switched on the TV. CNN Four recycles its splatter stories every twenty minutes, so we didn't have long to wait.

The bomb had gone off in a subway station. Did Richardson ride the subway? I realized I didn't know where the man lived or how he got back and forth from work.

The station would have channeled the energy up through its blast vents — everything in the city was designed or redesigned these days with bombs in mind. But that saved structures, not people. Images of the station platform showed a tangle of twisted bodies. The color, as in all bomb-blast scenes, seemed wrong; the concussion turns the victims' skin slightly blue.

The camera panned across arms and legs, the faces turned toward the camera and away.

"Three terrorist groups, Under Deconstruction, Aftershock, and The Last Wave, have all claimed responsibility for the bombing," said the news reader.

There, at the end of the pan, was Philip Richardson, discolored like the rest. At the end of the story, I ran back the television's memory cache and replayed the images. I froze the one that showed Richardson.

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"Get out," I told the research assistant. "Please."

I called the police.

"Are you family?" asked the desk sergeant when I told her what I wanted. "We can't make a verification like that until the next of kin have been notified."

"His goddam face was just on the goddam TV!"

"Rules are rules," she said. "Hang on." Her gaze shifted from the phone to another monitor as she keyed in the query. "No problem, anyway. This is cleared to go out. And, yeah, sorry. The list of fatalities includes your friend."

I broke the connection.

"He was no friend of mine."

Deserter.

AT FIRST I DISMISSED the thought of making a Richardson personality construct. It wasn't the personality I needed, but the mind. Substance, not surface.

But how different were they, really?

Maybe, Richardson had said, *all we'd have to do is teach the machine to go through the motions. Maybe it would kick out results as a by-product.*

I went to the I/O room where the hologram generator — Richardson's idea — had been installed. I called up Bierley.

"Hello, Maas," he said.

"Hi, Jackson."

"First names?" Bierley arched an eyebrow. "That's a first for you." Except for distortion flecks that were like a fine dust floating around him, Bierley was convincingly present.

"Well," I said, "let's be pals."

His laugh was ironic and embracing at the same time. "All right," he said. "Let's."

"Jackson, what's the product of 52,689 and 31,476?"

"My net worth?"

"No. Don't kid. What's the product?"

"What were those numbers again?"

"You're shading me, Jackson. You can't have forgotten."

About then, the Small Craft Advisory light came on, but I ignored it. Chaotic disturbances hardly ever built to hurricane force anymore. Sure

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enough, the light went out soon after it had come on.

"What's this about?" Bierley asked me.

"Did you calculate the product on the way to deciding how you'd respond to the question? Or did you jump straight to an analysis of what Bierley would say?"

"*I* did neither," Bierley said. Which was true. There wasn't an "I" there, except as a grammatical convention. "Don't confuse me with your machine, Dr. Maas. You're the scientist. You know what I'm talking about." He brushed the lapel of his jacket. "I'm an elegant illusion."

"Would you give me some investment advice, Jackson?"

The hologram smiled. "My forte was always building companies," he said, "not trading stocks. Best advice that I could give you about stocks is some I got at my daddy's knee. He said you don't go marrying some gal just because another fool loves her."

I smiled, and then I wondered if Bierley's father had actually said that. If it sounded good, that's what would matter to the construct. But that's just what would have mattered to the real Bierley, too.

That is, what had mattered to the real Bierley and what mattered now to the construct was that the story have its effect. He had made me smile, made me think that Bierley the billionaire was just a regular guy.

What if a Richardson construct could work the same way? The effect that Richardson had produced, the one I wanted to duplicate, was an effect on me. I wanted to stretch my thinking. What if that depended more on the emotional state he generated in me than on his actual ideas?

No, I thought. That was ridiculous.

What decided me was the phone call.

"Are you Maas?" the woman said. Her hair was long and black, but disarrayed. Her eyes were red-rimmed. On her face was the blankness that comes after too many days of anger or grief or worry, when the muscles can't hold the form of feeling any longer, but the feeling persists. "I'm Phillips," I thought she said. That is, I thought she was saying her name was Phillips. But she was only pausing to search for the next word.

"I'm Philip's...widow," she said.

I hadn't known Richardson was married. I wasn't the only one he had deserted.

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"Yes," I said, and then again, more gently: "Yes, Mrs. Richardson. I'm Dr. Maas." An infant wailed in the background, and Mrs. Richardson seemed not to have noticed. "I'm Elliot Maas."

"Do you know where he is?" she asked.

Was she really asking what I thought she was? I opened, then closed my mouth. What would I tell her? *He's dead, Mrs. Richardson. Death is not a location. Where is he? He isn't anywhere. Mrs. Richardson, he is not. Mrs. Richardson, your husband doesn't exist. Where he used to be, there is nothing. Mrs. Richardson...*

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm not being very clear." She put her hand to her forehead and closed her eyes. "The ashes, Dr. Maas. Have the ashes been delivered to you?"

I stared stupidly at the screen.

"The coroner's office says they had the ashes delivered to me, but they didn't. I thought perhaps they had made a mistake and sent them to Philip's work address." She opened her eyes. "Did the coroner's office make a delivery?" In the background, the infant cried more lustily.

"I don't know," I said. "I could check, I suppose."

"They used to..." Her mouth trembled, and she pursed her lips. Her eyes glistened. "They used to let you make your own arrangements," she said. "But they don't do that anymore because there are so many bombs and so many... I never saw him. I never got to say goodbye and now they can't even find his ashes."

"I'll make inquiries."

"His mother's been here, trying to help out, but she..." Richardson's wife blinked, as if waking. "Oh, God. The baby. I'm so sorry."

The phone went black, then the screen showed the Ameritech logo and the dial tone began to drone.

I made sure that the ashes hadn't been delivered to us, and I called the coroner's office where they swore that the ashes had been processed and delivered to Richardson's home address days earlier. They had a computer record of it.

When I called Mrs. Richardson back, it was the other Mrs. Richardson — his mother — who answered. She looked worn out, too. One more person that Richardson had abandoned.

But she would manage to get by in whatever way she had managed before. I was the one he had hurt the most. I was the one with the most to lose.

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When Richardson's wife came to the phone, I told her that I'd struck out with the coroner. "But I think there is a way that I can help you," I said. I even admitted that it might be of some use to me, as well.

Who knows whether the construct brought Sharon Richardson any consolation? She came by from time to time as the construct evolved, and she usually brought the baby. That actually caused a problem the first time she did it — I had cleared her through the building's recognition system, but TOS didn't want to let Richardson's infant daughter, a stranger, inside without my authorization. The door refused to open. TOS-mediated security still needed some tinkering.

In the I/O room, Sharon Richardson told the construct, "We miss you."

"He loved you," the construct told her.

"We miss you," she said again.

"I'm not really him."

"I know."

"What do you want me to say?"

"I don't know. There's something that never got said, but I don't know what it is."

"Everything passes away. Nothing lasts," the construct said. "That's the thing he carried with him every moment. Nothing lasts, and that's the thing we have to hold on to. That's the thing we have to understand, that we're as transitory as thoughts. Butterflies or thoughts. When we really understand that, then we're beautiful."

Defeatist, I thought. *Deserter*.

"That's not it," she said. "I heard him say that. More than once."

"What do you want me to say?" the construct repeated.

She looked at me, self-conscious, then turned away.

"He was selfish," she said to the floor. "I want to hear him... I want you to say you're sorry."

The construct sighed. "Do you think he died on purpose?"

"Did he?" she said. "I *loved* him!"

"Nothing lasts."

"Say it!"

The image of Philip Richardson closed his eyes, hung his head, and said, "Death comes. Sooner or later, it comes."

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Sharon Richardson didn't leave looking any more prepared for life without Philip than she had looked when she first called me, looking for his ashes.

I wasn't any more satisfied than she was. That the construct wasn't finished yet was the one thing that gave me hope. But not much.

Using the Bierley construct as the interviewer, TOS had talked to Sharon, to Richardson's mother, his brother, and his two sisters. The interviews took place in the I/O room where the hologram made Bierley more convincingly warm, caring, and real. He extracted insights, anecdotes, and honest appraisals from every technician who had worked with Richardson on TOS. I flew in Richardson's grad school peers and colleagues from his stints at MIT and Stanford. They all talked to Bierley, and Bierley interviewed me, too. I was as exhaustive and as honest as I could be in conveying my impressions of Richardson. Everything about him mattered—even whatever had irritated me. It was all part of the pattern that made him Philip Richardson. After the interviews, I'd stay in the I/O room talking to the construct as it developed. That made for late nights.

Irritatingly, TOS started to suffer again from hurricanes. Those chaos storms in the information flow started to shut down the Richardson construct around one in the morning, regularly.

"It's like you're too much contradiction for TOS to handle," I told the construct late one night. "A scientist and a mystic."

"No mystic," Richardson said. "I'm more scientist than you are, Maas. You're in a contest with the universe. You want to *beat* it. If someone gave you the fountain of youth, guaranteed to keep you alive forever with the proviso that you'd never understand how it worked, you'd jump at the chance. Science is a means to you. You want results. You're a mere technologist."

"I have a focus. You could never keep yourself on track."

"You have an obsession," the construct countered. "You're right that I can never resist the temptation of the more interesting questions. But that's what matters to me. What does all of this —" He swept his hand wide to encompass the universe with his gesture, and his hand came to rest on his own chest. "What does it all mean? That's my question, Maas. I never stop asking it."

"You sound like him. Sometimes I forget what you are."

"I'm a dead loss, that's what I am," the construct said with a smile. "I

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probably argue as well as Richardson, but when it comes to conceptualizing, I'm just TOS. Not that the machine is chopped liver, but you haven't resurrected Philip Richardson."

The Small Craft Advisory light had been on for an hour, but now the next light in the sequence came on. Gale Warning.

"We'd better talk fast," said Richardson. "I don't have much time." He smiled again. "Memento mori."

I said nothing, but stared at him. The hologram generator had been improved a bit recently, and for minutes at a time, I could detect no flaw in his appearance. The eye was so easy to fool.

This was the fifth night in a row with a hurricane. They always came after midnight. Tick, tick, tick. Like clockwork.

But TOS hurricanes were a function of chaos. Why would they suddenly behave so predictably?

And then I thought again, *The eye is so easy to fool.*

The ashes never *had* turned up.

"Son of a bitch!" I said aloud.

That's when the hurricane light came on and the hologram of Philip Richardson winked out.

I SAT THINKING for five minutes in the quiet building, the building that was down to just two overnight guards — a skeleton crew — since TOS oversaw security and controlled all the locks inside and out. A big, silent building. For five minutes, I considered what I needed to do. Then I went to the part of the building that housed the TOS memory.

The multi-cameral design of TOS made it relatively easy to isolate various functions from one another. I could pull all the sensory "rooms" offline and make changes in them, and the rest of TOS wouldn't know what I was doing. It would be like slicing the corpus callosum in the human brain — the left hemisphere wouldn't know what the right was doing, wouldn't know that things were being monkeyed with in the other hemisphere. But TOS was self-programming, so I needed instructions from the left hemisphere to reprogram the right. Getting the job done without tripping whatever safeguards Richardson had programmed in meant pulling out one room at a time, giving it a function, downloading the result of the function as a

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digital record, then emptying the room of any traces of what it had just done before I connected it back to the whole. One room at a time, I captured the instructions that would let me generate false data for the sensory rooms.

The process would have taken thirty seconds if I could have just told TOS what I wanted to do, but it wouldn't have worked that way. Doing it the slow way took an hour.

I went back to the I/O room and said, "I'm going home." TOS started to process the words, and the phrase tugged at the tripwires I had just programmed.

To the rest of TOS, the sensory rooms sent sounds and images of my walking out of the room, closing the door, walking down the corridor, down the stairs, out of the building, and across the parking lot. TOS saw me get into my car and drive away.

And TOS didn't just see this. It heard, felt, and smelled it, too.

Meanwhile, the sensory rooms suppressed the data that was coming from the I/O room, data that said I was still there, at the back of the room, hiding behind file cabinets with the lights out. Otherwise, everything ran as it normally would.

The eye was easy to fool. Yes, and so was the ear. So was the motion detector. So was the air sampler.

He came in at about four o'clock. The hall lights at his back showed that he was dressed in something baggy. He said, "Lights," and the lights came on in the room. It was a sweat suit. A gray one. He said, "The one and the zero," his code, I suppose, for "System Restore," and the Hurricane, Gale Warning, and Small Craft Advisory lights clicked off in quick succession.

He called up the construct and said to it, in a flat voice, "Hello, Richardson."

And the construct answered, mimicking the tone, "Hello, Richardson." The construct shook his head. "You sound hollow." Then he smiled. "Death warmed over, eh?"

The man in the sweat suit sat down with his back to me and watched the construct without answering.

"So tell me what it's like," said the construct. "You give *me* some information for a change."

"It's more real than you could believe. He's more dead than you can imagine."

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"Of course." Big smile. "I'm a construct. I only *seem* to imagine."

"Richardson is more dead than even Richardson could have imagined."

"Wasn't that the point of this exercise?"

The man in the sweat suit didn't answer.

"I don't understand why you're not excited. This is a breakthrough!"

"I suppose it is." He took a deep breath and let it out. "Give me Bierley."

"Cheer up," the construct said. "It's the great adventure. You'll make the journey with your memory intact."

"Shut your trap and give me Bierley."

The Richardson construct hesitated a moment longer. Then, without transition, it was Bierley in the hologram.

"Hi," Bierley said.

"Hi, Jackson."

"You don't look so good."

"So I've been told."

"Want to start with easy questions?" asked Bierley. "His favorite color, that sort of thing?"

"I'm through with the construct. It doesn't interest me anymore." He stood up. "I just came by to tell you that it's time for me to move on."

"That's enough," I said.

He jumped at the sound of my voice, but he didn't turn around.

"Richardson," I told him, "you are a son of a bitch."

"Richardson's dead."

"So you've told me," said Bierley.

"I was talking to Maas," he said, his voice still flat.

"Maas went home over an hour ago," said the construct.

"Turn the construct off," I told him. "I built a sensory barricade. TOS doesn't know I'm in the building, and won't know it until I leave this room."

"Clever."

"What is?" said Bierley.

I said, "No more clever than splicing yourself into the image bank at CNN Four. No more clever than hacking your way into records at the coroner's office and police department."

"TOS did most of the work."

"Most of what work?" said the construct.

"Turn it off," I said again.

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"Bierley," he said, "give me Richardson again."

The hologram flipped immediately to the other man's image.

"You want Richardson? There he is. That's the closest anyone can get. Not the real thing, of course, but more Richardson than I am." But then he did shut the construct down. Again he said, "Richardson is dead."

"You used me. You planted the idea. You knew I'd build the construct."

"I'm not him. I'm the space in between. I'm the void." He edged toward the door as I stepped closer to him, close enough to see his profile. He still didn't turn to face me.

"I want to kick your living, breathing ass," I said. "We've lost a lot of time on this."

I nodded at the empty space above the hologram projector. I said, "So you've met him. You've had a chance to see yourself as others saw you. Was it worth it?"

He said nothing at first. "The curious thing," he said at last, "was that the construct wasn't surprised to meet me."

"Nothing much fazes you, Richardson. Why should your construct be any different?"

"I don't think that's it," he said. "I think it was something others knew about Richardson, that he would do anything to know..."

"What do you do during the day? Do you watch the building?"

He was silent.

"Have you seen your wife come here? Doesn't look good, does she? She paid a price for your little experiment, wouldn't you say? Have you been keeping up?"

"Every day," he said, "I'm aware of the zero where Richardson used to be. Every day, I'm face to face with his absence."

I clenched my fists. "Do you have any idea what it's been like for me to think that you were gone?"

"I know she...." For a moment, he was at a loss. "He loved her very much."

"What about me? I can't bring TOS to its potential on my own. You left me without hope!"

"Richardson did that," he said. And again, flatly: "Richardson is dead."

"Why did you have to do it like this? We could have made you a construct! Do you think you need to be dead for people to say what they really

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think of you?" I pounded my fist on the hologram console. "Damn it, I'd have done whatever you wanted me to. Whatever it takes, whatever you need. But it didn't have to be like this!"

"Richardson wanted to bring you along," he said. He took another sideways step toward the door. "He thought it would help you if you had a closer look at what you were afraid of."

I sat down. I tried to take the anger out of my voice. "Whatever you need," I said, "however strange, you just ask for it from now on. Understand? After we get this straightened out, assuming I can keep you out of prison, you tell me about how you want to use TOS, and we'll do that. Just so you give some attention to the things that *I* am interested in."

"I don't think you understand. You can't bring him back from the dead. The construct was for the bardo."

"The what?"

"The in-between time. Before its next life, the soul looks back, understands. Looks back, but there's no *going* back. There's only the next life, and forgetfulness."

He turned his face to me. His expression was blank, so blank that in truth he didn't look like himself.

"I'm the soul who doesn't forget. I'll have a new life, the life of a man who *understands* death. I have died. I am dead. And I will live again." He looked at his hands. "What a thing to long for."

He was right. I hadn't understood. I had thought this whole thing was like the story of the man who stages his own funeral so he can hear what the mourners will have to say about him. But there was more to it than that.

I said, "You're not going anywhere."

He stepped closer to the door. "I'll have another life."

"Got TOS to make an electronic funds transfer, did you? You're a rich man?"

"It's not like that. I'm going naked. I'm taking nothing along."

"I see. Taking no baggage but your worthless skin and your newfound wisdom."

"Memory."

"How about your wife, then? Did you and TOS arrange some little windfall for her?"

"Richardson's wife!" he shouted. "I'm not him! Richardson is dead!"

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He ran, then. I followed him out of the I/O room, but I didn't bother to run.

As soon as I was out in the hallway, TOS did what I knew it would do. I had just materialized out of thin air, and TOS could only conclude, recognizing me or not, that some sort of security breach had taken place.

All over the building, doors locked. The alarm rang at the security guards' desks. Through the glass wall along the corridor, I could see one of the guards in the other wing looking up at the lights on our floor.

Richardson tried the stairwell door. It wouldn't budge.

"Richardson," I said gently as I approached. "Philip."

He ran down the side corridor, but was blocked by a fire door.

"It's over," I said when I had turned the corner. "Let it be over."

He whirled to face me. "I won't bring him back!" he said. "Forever is *your* obsession, not mine!" Then, pleading: "I *can't* bring him back! It can't be done!"

"Surely," I said, "you've seen whatever you needed to see. Surely you have come to understand whatever it is that you needed to understand."

"I won't help you!"

I grabbed the front of his sweat shirt. "When they arrest you, Philip, when the truth comes out..."

He masked his face with shaking hands and slumped against the fire door.

"When the truth comes out, I can help you or I can hurt you, Richardson."

"Dead," he said through his hands. "He's dead."

"You can get your life back. It's going to be a bit smashed up. It's going to take some piecing back together. But you can have it back."

He pressed his hands hard against his face.

BIERLEY SAVED HIS ASS.

The construct was making calls to our politicos before the police had taken Richardson from the building, and before sunrise, there were thirty spin doctors in different parts of the country finding ways to put what Richardson had done in the best possible light.

The press verdict, basically, was genius stretched to the limit. He'd pushed himself too hard doing work vital to national interests. The courts

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ordered rest, lots of psychological evaluations, and release under his own recognizance. Eventually, he received a suspended sentence for data fraud.

And Sharon Richardson took him back. I wouldn't have, if he'd been replaceable. It was hard to imagine an infidelity worse than his. I had to welcome him back. But she chose to.

Deserters.

When the work is hard, I think of deserters. And the work is often hard. We've been at it again for months now, but Richardson and I don't throw off sparks the way we once did. We talk about technical problems with TOS, and we bounce ideas off each other, but something's gone.

No more conceptual leaps. No more flying from breakthrough to breakthrough.

I think of men on the rail of a sinking tanker. I think of the arctic explorer stranded on the ice.

I think of deserters. What are they afraid of?

Maybe they are afraid of the wrong thing.

The dead bear witness.

From the bottom of the sea, dead sailors wave their arms.

It's not that Richardson has gone dull. If anything, his mind has more edge than before. But we'll be arguing some point of memory structures and I'll happen to catch his eye and see...

There's someone else looking back.

"Philip Richardson," he likes to remind me, "is dead."

I'd be a damned fool to believe him.

There are a lot of damned fools in the world.

I still hear the tick, tick, tick of my heart, the one, one, one that counts down to zero. I still believe that there's a chance, just a chance, that I can find a door into eternity. When Richardson and I were at our best, there were days when I thought I had glimpsed that door.

But I don't work with the same focus I once did. Whatever I'm doing, there's something that flutters at the edge of my consciousness.

When, at quiet moments, I hear the blood rush in my ears, when I feel my heart thumping in my chest, it's not just the numbers counting down that I think of. It's also the numbers already counted. Bierley, gone. Richardson...different.

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I am fifty-nine years old.

What if I succeed? What if I reside in TOS, eternal, separate, watching the living die and die and die?

Often, I think of the man in the lifeboat. He has rowed himself to safety, beyond the burning oil, beyond the fire's reach. Through the smoke and flames, he can see the others waving to him, holding out their arms. Do they think he'd row back across the fire in a wooden boat?

Crowded at the rail, the sailors wave and sink. Each drowns alone, but they sink together.

There's no comfort in a common grave, I tell myself.

But on days when I can't think clearly, I sit and look at my hands, the hands of a man who is rowing himself to safety, and I know that the sea around him is wide. And black. And cold. And empty.

"Hold it. It's Uncle Ezra!"

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BOOKS

ROBERT K. J. KILLHEFFER

Waking the Moon by Elizabeth Hand, HarperPrism, 390 pages, $19.00

The Furies by Suzy McKee Charnas, Tor, 383 pages, $22.95

FOR SOME time it was nearly as unfashionable to search for scientific evidence of cognitive differences between the sexes as it was to look for such "innate" differences between racial groups, but lately both pursuits have been regaining some favor. Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's massive study *The Bell Curve* stirred up controversy with its claims of IQ differences between races, and meanwhile, from academic journals such as *Nature* to popular newspapers and magazines like *Newsweek*, studies using brain imaging techniques have reported increasingly convincing evidence that at least some of the variation in cognitive abilities (such as linguistic proficiency, sensitivity to emotional signals, etc.) between the genders might somehow be inherent, biologically hardwired, rather than culturally imposed — and, therefore, to one degree or another, inescapable. (The role of cultural *reinforcement* of innate traits, however, remains underinvestigated.)

All men (and women), it seems, are not created equal after all. Combine that with another recent popular science fad — applying evolutionary biology to human behavior, casting a deterministic Darwinian light on such issues as child abuse and sexual infidelity — and you've got the makings of an increasingly worrisome case: if many of our differences are really built-in, perhaps the gap between the sexes can never be bridged successfully; perhaps there can never be true understanding and peace between males and females.

Science fiction has, of course, had a long and illustrious history of addressing such issues, from Ursula K. Le Guin's classic *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Joanna Russ's *The Female*

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Man, and the stories of James Tiptree, Jr., to the more recent work of Eleanor Arnason, Gwyneth Jones, Connie Willis, and many others (we may note in passing that the vast majority of such work has come from female writers). It's interesting to see, in these days of resurgent conservatism and anti-feminist backlash, how contemporary sf reflects the many changes that have reshaped gender politics in the 1990s.

Elizabeth Hand's latest novel (her hardcover debut), *Waking the Moon*, presents the battle between the sexes as an age-old struggle between ancient, superhuman forces. For thousands of years the shadowy *Benandanti* — a secret society of scholar-magicians — have quite deliberately preserved the patriarchal structure of civilization. It was the *Benandanti* who put down medieval resurgences of pagan goddess worship, who burnt the witches and razed the sacred groves, expunging nearly all memory of the ancient worship of the Moon Goddess and the matriarchal society that originally dominated in the cradles of civilization. But She has never been totally forgotten, and Her time may be coming again.

Grandiose as this plot sounds, it spends most of its time in the background. The text focuses instead on Katherine "Sweeney" Cassidy, a student at the prestigious and mysterious University of the Archangels and St. John the Divine in Washington D.C. The Divine (as it's called) is a *Benandanti* stronghold, where they train their protégés, though most of the students are like Sweeney, just normal college kids who proceed through to graduation completely unaware of the *Benandanti* and their doings. Sweeney, however, through accident or fate, becomes entangled with two of the *Benandanti*'s cadets — the radiant and compelling Angelica di Rienzi and the romantic, dissolute Oliver Crawford — and through them she begins to learn things she wasn't meant to know....

In her previous novels (*Winterlong* and its sequels), Hand brought lush prose and vibrant, decadent imagery to a plot and scenario that harked back to sf's pulpy roots, a tale of post-apocalypse America garnished with cyborgs and mad androids, genetic experimentation, ruined cities and desolate wastes. The mixture worked, somehow, making this familiar fare fresh and vigorous in her bold and colorful treatment, but there was always a sense of tension between Hand's writing and her material. In *Waking the Moon* there's a pervasive tension, too, though here it comes from the juxtaposition of sorcery, vengeful goddesses, secret

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From *The New York Times* bestselling author of *The Mists of Avalon*
comes a towering work of imagination and fantasy

GHOSTLIGHT

Marion Zimmer Bradley

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societies, and ritual sacrifice on the one hand and the mundane realities of Sweeney's life on the other. Within the first twenty-five pages we witness two scenes of wizardry (including the summoning of an oracular dark angel), and yet surrounding these glimpses of magic is the story of Sweeney's first few days on campus, her insecurity and homesickness, her first day of class, her new friendships with Angelica and Oliver. Of course, many writers of fantasy have milked this sort of scenario before, but Hand's treatment feels nothing like the work of John Crowley, nor Emma Bull, nor Charles de Lint. Where those writers let the magic imbue the everyday landscape with a fantastical sheen, Hand keeps the two realms separate, emphasizing rather than blurring the lines between the magical and the mundane. Sweeney's encounters with sorcery cause her none of the sort of existential crisis we might expect — she fears for her safety, but her worldview appears unchallenged (she's more concerned about her feelings for Oliver than the implications of having seen something undeniably supernatural). Washington D.C. remains as unmagical and concrete as ever, the guiding hand of the *Benandanti* remains invisible, and their wizardry seems hardly to impinge on the larger world.

The juxtaposition is made all the sharper by Hand's portrayal of Sweeney, Angelica, Oliver, and their fellow students — they're callow and artificial, self-absorbed and melodramatic, compensating for their insecurities with put-on personalities. She captures college freshmen almost too vividly: it's hard at first to feel much of anything for these overwrought poseurs, or to take their emotions and concerns seriously. Hand herself seems to sense this, twice allowing the narrative voice of the older Sweeney (who's actually telling the story) to apologize for her younger self and her friends: at one point she says of Oliver, "If I'd been older, I might have found him insufferable, with his fey affectations and prep school jargon ...." Later she implores the reader, "You have to remember I was so young, and drunk, as full of raw wet emotion as I was of bad wine," and it's clear that Hand is brokering this uneasy marriage of jejune student life and ancient, brooding sorcery intentionally, refusing to let the tale settle into any single mood.

It's something of a relief when the tale jumps forward to Sweeney's later life, nearly twenty years after her first semester at the Divine. She's fallen out of touch with most of her classmates, but one day catches sight

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of Angelica on a daytime talk show. Angelica has become a kind of New Age feminist guru *à la* Clarissa Pinkola Estes, exhorting women to take up worship of the Moon Goddess through a series of self-help-style books and empowerment workshops. But Angelica's Goddess revivalism is a bit different from the warm-fuzzy versions out there today; she focuses on a different "aspect" of the ancient Moon woman, the darker side: "'We have to acknowledge the Mother *and* the Avenger,'" she proclaims. "'We must embrace She Who Mourns and She Who Creates, but we must also honor She Who Destroys.'" And Angelica doesn't just mean this figuratively; as we learn bit by bit, she and her inner circle are actually practicing ritual sacrifice of young men, in an effort to bring the ancient goddess Othiym back to power on Earth.

Though we've left the affected air of the college campus behind, Hand continues to present unsettling juxtapositions. Here we have the rather banal world of New Age talk-show blather as the public face of a very real and bloody attempt to reshape the world. And the character of Angelica herself is an uneasy and unreconciled blend of the supernatural and the quotidian: one moment we'll see Angelica in her goddess mode, wielding her magic, summoning and commanding the powerful "*naphaim*" to do her bidding, and the next she'll shift to something as mundane as worrying over why her son hasn't called her in a while: "She knew better than to worry about that — did eighteen-year-old boys *ever* call their mothers?" Such moments could easily veer toward parody if it weren't for Hand's expert control; the emotional tension of this constant juxtaposition of moods never makes us laugh, but instead leaves us uneasy and off-balance.

At first it seems odd and even frustrating that we get very little sense of Angelica's motives — why she's willing to kill in the service of this vengeful goddess — but then we recognize that Hand sees Angelica's fate, and all the acts that lead to it, as a matter of predestination. We recall the "Sign" noted by the *Benandanti* at the very beginning of the novel, warning that the goddess was going to attempt a comeback, and also how they refer to Angelica as "Chosen." And we note the none-too-subtle hints that Angelica's origins are not entirely natural — that her mother may have been some sort of sea spirit, or the ghost of one of Othiym's ancient priestesses. If she's born to bring Othiym back, then her motives aren't really an issue; it's a matter of

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destiny, and she has no real choice in the matter.

This is an unusual approach for a contemporary novel — even a genre novel — in which the delineation of character and motivation are often of central if not paramount importance, but in this case I think it makes sense, because it's here that *Waking the Moon* begins to reflect some aspects of contemporary gender politics. Hand exploits the genre's freedom to ignore questions of deeper character and motivation in order to explore an idea: the element of predestination in Angelica's character suggests that the roles of the sexes are similarly predetermined, biologically if not magically; individual motives are not what drive the eternal conflict, but irresistible innate forces.

Hand says surprisingly little directly about these issues, but there is one scene which I think confirms this sense in *Waking the Moon* that gender roles are rooted in inexorable biological imperatives, and that the battle may never be over. Two of Sweeney's old Divine classmates meet to discuss what they've learned about Angelica and her plans, and they choose a strip club, thinking that atmosphere would provide "cover" from Angelica's sorcerous probes. (Immediately we have to wonder: are these extremes the only choices? If it's either the vengeful goddess Othiym or the seedy degradation of a place called "Chumley Peckerwood's," it's a pretty poor ballot, and I'll probably abstain.) As they talk, Annie suddenly experiences a moment in which she sees in her friend Baby Joe all the worst aspects of maleness: "the oily taint of vodka on his skin and pungent tobacco on his breath. Without wanting to Annie cringed, thinking of her old friend sitting beside her with an erection *...It almost makes you think they get what they deserve...*" That moment, I think, encapsulates the sense of gender destiny; no matter how close they are, or how much they share, or how much they depend on each other, there's this gulf between men and women that cannot be bridged, that stands between even the best friends. In this way, *Waking the Moon* seems to reflect one stream of feminist thought, which sees the sexes as innately different and seeks to emphasize women's unique qualities. At the extreme edge of this stream lie those like Angelica, who dream of a women's revolt which enslaves men under a vengeful matriarchal rule.

And yet, *Waking the Moon* would in other ways seem a very odd book from such an extreme point of

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view. The only female character with any real power is Angelica, and she's made out to be the villain. Her brand of female empowerment is so monstrous that the rule of the patriarchal *Benandanti* — to whom "'women are just sort of beside the point'" — comes to seem far preferable. Sweeney, the central character, has felt stagnant and lifeless in her career and reawakens only when a male love interest enters her life — hardly the sort of pattern many feminists would applaud.

But perhaps after all this isn't so hard to reconcile with today's gender politics. Extremists like Angelica (e.g., Andrea Dworkin) tend to get a lot of the media attention, and it has left many women who don't want to go to such lengths feeling somewhat left out. I'm thinking, for example, of my mother, who rankles whenever someone looks down on her for staying home to raise her kids. She wanted to do that; she enjoyed doing it; she gets a thrill out of baking Christmas cookies and painting Easter eggs; she counted it a blessing that she was able to spend so much of her time watching us grow up. And yet she's never been a "submissive" woman, a stereotypical "housewife"; she's held her own opinions, held her own jobs (sometimes two), been active in town politics (even running for First Selectman — kind of like mayor), and so on. What she hasn't done is spend her time at a high-powered career, and she's always resented those women who scorned her, as if she's betrayed her sisters (and herself) by "settling" for raising kids. She's done what she wanted to do, exercised her free and willful choice — and that's what the women's movement (and any other liberation movement) should really be about: opening the way for freedom of choice, not merely substituting a new set of cultural imperatives for the old.

And that, I think, is where Sweeney fits in. She's got a job, she's clearly her own woman and can take care of herself, but she rejects the extremism of Angelica's movement — she wants the love of a man to fill her life, and that's what she chooses. Though surrounded by this age-old predestined battle between patriarchy and matriarchy, in the end she gives in neither to the *Benandanti* nor to Angelica's Goddess; she makes her choices for herself, and thereby escapes the extremes of either system.

All of this may be over-interpretation, trying to see patterns and significance where none were intended — for, as I've mentioned, Hand says precious little about any of these issues openly — yet I feel that

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Waking the Moon, intentionally or not, provides some very provocative reflections on the continuing strife between the sexes. It's also a gripping story, with some exquisitely creepy moments, some lovely lyrical prose, and some vivid and memorable characters. Read it for these latter reasons alone, and if it also leaves you thinking about the nature of our human differences, whether they're molded into us at birth, a genetic destiny, or are instead the results of our willing choices and individual motives (and therefore, presumably, more subject to change), then Hand has done more than just entertain, she has enlightened.

Suzy McKee Charnas's *The Furies*, the long-awaited sequel to her groundbreaking (and still eminently relevant) feminist novels *Walk to the End of the World* (1974) and *Motherlines* (1978), takes on similar issues more directly and openly than *Waking the Moon*, and its portrayal of the battle between the sexes is much grimmer. In Charnas's post-apocalyptic future, the men of the enclave known as the Holdfast have utterly enslaved women (whom they call "fems"), treating them brutally; some had even proposed using them like cattle, slaughtering them for food, before internal strife tore the Holdfast apart. As that was happening, one fem, Alldera, was freed by her master and encouraged to flee, and her flight brought her across a wasteland to the fertile plains where the Amazonian free-born Riding Women roam (they've found a way to conceive parthenogenically by mating with their horses, and so do without men altogether). Alldera made a place for herself among these proud horsewomen, but now, fifteen years later, she decides that the time has come for her and her band of "Free Fems" —other escaped slaves—to return to the Holdfast, confront their former masters, and conquer them if they can.

They do so against the wishes of most of the Riding Women, who fear what might happen if the men of the Holdfast learn of their existence, and one band of riders pursues the Free Fems, but cannot overtake them before they've crossed the wastes into the Holdfast and had their first clash with men. Somewhat grudgingly, the Riding Women decide to join Alldera's army rather than oppose it or return to the grasslands unsuccessful.

Though several battles ensue, it quickly becomes clear that the Holdfast has never recovered from the warfare that ravaged it years before, and the small population of men and

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their slave fems can offer little resistance. Charnas isn't interested so much in the physical struggle of the Free Fems against the Holdfast men — the largest battle, in fact, takes place entirely off-stage — but rather in the complicated issues that arise among the army of women as they get their opportunity for revenge.

Tensions begin to divide the women's army from the very first; the bloodthirstiness of some of her soldiers leaves Alldera "shaken," and a rift begins to form: "She was nervous of her own people in this savage mood." Some of the Free Fems seem to be bent on nothing but simple violent revenge, but Alldera wants something more, wants to find some way to make the Holdfast a safe, functioning home for her women. (They need some men alive because, unlike the Riding Women, they cannot reproduce without them.) But it's more than a merely practical problem: it's a moral problem faced by any successful revolution. How do you take power without becoming as abusive and cruel as the ones you're replacing? When, early on, the army encounters Setteo, a gelded male who seems more than a little crazy (though harmless), Alldera sees in him a reflection of the fems' slave experience, in the way he abases himself to them: "He looked so like some specially trained house fem, contorted on command for the entertainment of an audience of casually cruel masters." Those masters, in this case, are Alldera and her army, and she finds that reversal of roles "profoundly disturbing."

The rift in the army surrounding this issue only widens as the Free Fems push deeper into the Holdfast. Having taken male prisoners, Alldera continues to advocate restraint, but others carry out their revenge in secret lynchings. A cult devoted to "Moonwoman" takes up ritual sacrifice (a striking echo of Angelica's goddess cult in *Waking the Moon*), and even cannibalism — matching the very worst that their male masters had imagined doing with the fems. Alldera refuses to participate in these excesses of vengeance: "'Do you remember the warnings against becoming what we hate most?'" she asks her troops. "'Do you want to spit in the faces of our foredams, who endured every filthy thing and still held on to their human decency?'"

Even more disturbing are the accusations of some of the slave fems who are freed by Alldera's army. "'Is that what you came for?'" asks one. "'To be our masters in the men's place?'" Another rails at them: "'You come here and break and burn everything we have, you decide our lives

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for us according to what you want.... You present us your plans and expect us to touch ground to you.... Have you come to give "freedom" only to fems who kiss your feet and call *you* master?'" This is another classic moral quandary of revolution: what if some people don't want to be freed? There's no easy answer, and Charnas provides none.

As these tensions tear away at the army's unity, Alldera herself struggles with similar issues on a personal level; in many ways, her internal anguish is a microcosm of the army's. When she meets up with her former master, Eykar Bek, she's caught up in a maelstrom of contradictory feelings: distrust, anger, doubt, but through it all, most surprisingly, a kind of joy. She feels an undeniable bond with him, from all they had experienced together, and it confuses her. She decides to keep him alive, though that decision further widens the gap between herself and her more vengeful comrades.

What's interesting is that, though Charnas's vision of the battle between the sexes is in many ways much darker and more hopeless than Hand's in *Waking the Moon*, she doesn't see it as the result of innate forces, undeniable biological imperatives. In fact, in Charnas's world, it would seem just the reverse: nearly all aspects of behavior and gender identity seem to be culturally imposed rather than genetically programmed. The men of the Holdfast are studiously homosexual, turning to each other for their romantic bonds, having sex with fems only to produce children (and often needing to be drugged heavily to manage it). Likewise, the Riding Women are (obviously) homosexual, the idea of sex with a man too unimaginable even to be revolting. Only here and there, in individual cases, do we see fems who find sex with men attractive and pleasurable, and their aberrant tastes cause a stir in the army too. The problems that arise between the various groups of women — the Riding Women, the Free Fems, and the Newly Freed — arise from their different backgrounds and experiences, not from any sort of innate differences, and it would seem to be the same in the strife between men and fems.

For Charnas, the force driving the battle of the sexes is history, not biology. It's the "herstory" of abuse and degradation, brutality and humiliation, that makes peace between the sexes seem impossible. Even Alldera, who more than anyone else in her army hopes for some more palatable resolution, despairs of it at times: "'Who can make a new, whole

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self,'" she asks Eykar, "'without spending the ocean of old poisons first?'" It's that ocean of old poisons that divides men and women, not biological destiny.

On the face of it, this would seem to make Charnas's book much bleaker than Hand's. "'But it's endless, then,'" Eykar protests, "'with no forgiveness, ever!'" But in fact *The Furies* is not without its own notes of hope, and many of those notes begin with Setteo, who, being castrated, belongs properly to neither the men nor the fems, and takes advantage of his ambiguous position to offer some insights, in his own addled way. Reflecting on his own sexlessness, he muses, "Other states, between the extremes, must exist. He was curious to discover...what those states might be." Not long thereafter, facing the wrath of one of the Free Fems, he obliquely points out that their anger can never be assuaged by killing, no matter how much of it they do: "'The one you want to feed me to, Blessed,'" he says, "'can never be filled. Never, never, never.'" That gives the woman pause, and she spares his life. And soon after that, thinking to herself, Alldera makes her strongest statement of hope: "Something had to be imagined," she thinks, "besides what everyone remembered: brutality, pain, danger, and degradation; or how would they ever be able to bring themselves to create the future they had come home for?"

Though Charnas's portrait of the gender wars is in many ways very different from Hand's, a similar image of the contemporary state of affairs emerges from *The Furies* as from *Waking the Moon*. Toward the end, Eykar has a moment of insight: "The central matter of the femmish conquest," he realizes, "was, of course, the relations of the fems to each other, among themselves, and to the Wild Women who had returned with them." All the tension and conflict in the book really boils down to that: the differences of opinion and perspective and emotion among the fems themselves. And that seems to me to be a fair description of the state of feminism in our world today; having won some victories, having taken some prisoners, the women's movement has fragmented and fights as often against itself as it does against its opponents. And not a little of that infighting surrounds the same kinds of issues that divide the Free Fems. At one point, Alldera makes a statement that echoes my own thoughts about liberation movements, laid out above: "'If we compel each other in anything as our masters compelled us in everything,'" she tells her

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comrades, "'our victories will be an ugly joke at our own expense.'" To that I can only say, amen.

Since Charnas takes on these issues so directly, *The Furies* might sound in my discussion here like a rather dry, talky, pontifical exercise, and yet it is nothing of the sort. What saves the book from becoming a kind of fictionalized manifesto (womanifesto?) is Charnas's strong narrative voice, and her subtle, surehanded, lean yet colorful prose. Her characters are alive, complex, believable; her future world, grim as it is, has the texture and flavor of reality. The issues never seem forced into the story, injected by authorial fiat, but emerge from the plot organically, inevitably. What's best about Charnas's writing is its breathtaking economy, the way she avoids speaking too directly at the reader. Rarely are we *told* things about a character, for instance; we learn about them as we'd learn about an acquaintance in the real world, through their words and deeds. We are spared unnecessary back-story, and lengthy digressions of description, and yet we are never confused or lost; in Charnas's hands, the world describes itself, and we need no map or glossary. Hers is so rare a skill that we hardly realize how much we've missed it, until we recognize it here. Charnas's skill makes *The Furies* a provocative, thoughtful essay on the relations between the sexes and a powerful, vivid novel full of genuine human emotion. Can there be peace between men and women? Can the ocean of old poisons ever be drained, or bridged? None can say, but *The Furies* marks a vital step toward that eminently desirable goal, toward that day when, in Charnas's words, "the conditions giving rise to such writing have been utterly eliminated everywhere and forever."

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Book of Atrix Wolfe, by Patricia A. McKillip, Ace, 1995, 256pp, $18.95, Hardcover

PATRICIA McKillip's name has come up more than once in previous columns, but we've never actually had a look at one of her books. I suppose this is because I have such admiration for what she does that I feel the quality of her fiction is self-evident and surely everyone must already read her. However, when I'm asked "Who do you read?" at Q&A sessions following readings I have done and I mention her name (because it almost always seems to come to mind first), I'm gratified to see members of the audience nodding in agreement, but also surprised at the mystified looks that settle over the features of others. So perhaps it's high time we investigated one of her books.

Her latest novel is *The Book of Atrix Wolfe* and it comes in an entirely suitable package: a small-sized book with gorgeous Romantic artwork by Kinuko Y. Craft that puts me in mind of Botticelli, had he been painting with the Pre-Raphaelites; the sort of book that slips easily into a side pocket and could be taken along on a ramble through the dream-like woods portrayed in Craft's painting...or found in McKillip's prose.

For there are deep woods here, and faerie, and strayings between both into the Fields We Know. Which, to my mind, aptly describes McKillip's writing as well for she's as comfortable describing the workings of a castle's kitchen, with its cooks and spit-boys and scullery maids, as she is running with wolves or riding dark mage winds, or taking us into the bewildering realm of Faerie.

The story centers on a small handful of characters:

The mage Atrix Wolfe who, in an attempt to stop a war, created an antlered Hunter more fearsome than any army. When the Hunter destroys

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the army of the enemy as well as the army and king of Pulucir that Wolfe was trying to protect, Wolfe flees into the wilderness in the shape of his namesake and eschews all human contact for twenty years. When the book opens, the Hunter has returned, and Wolfe must finally confront his creation.

Then there is Talis, the son of Pulucir's dead king, younger brother to the reigning Burne. A mage in training and enamored with the legend of Atrix Wolfe, he is easily drawn into the glamours of the Queen of the Wood who is searching for Wolfe for her own reasons.

And finally we have Saro, the scullery maid, found by the wood stack the night the king was slain. Mute, her memory gone, she is almost invisible as she cleans cauldrons and pots in a corner of the castle's kitchen, but in the water of her cleaning pot, she sees things — people she doesn't remember, Talis when he is lost in the wood, and the Hunter.

McKillip's forte is delineating relationships and she does so here with her usual perceptiveness, but she is also blessed with a poet's eye for the lyric phrase and the storyteller's gift for how she lets the story unfold. She has been writing what we might consider high fantasy for many years now, but she always maintains her own voice, she always cuts through the baggage that impedes too many other writers harvesting similar crops to bring a fresh perspective to the archetypical figures that populate her stories.

The Book of Atrix Wolfe can count its heritage back to *The Riddle Master of Hed* (1976) and all the wonderful fantasies McKillip has given us before and since that popular classic, but at the same time it remains its own story, carries its own voice. I don't think there's another writer working today who can quite capture the mysterious resonance and mystery of faerie in as effective a manner as she does, but because she does so, book after book, I'll never completely lose my love for secondary world fantasy novels.

If you want to see why I wax so enthusiastically over McKillip's work, *The Book of Atrix Wolfe* will soon make it clear.

Dark Earth Dreams, by Candas Jane Dorsey & Roger Deegan, Tesseract Books, 1994, 25pp/72:19min, Cdn$19.95 CD & chapbook

To celebrate the new ownership of Tesseract Books (it was acquired by the Edmonton-based The Books Collective), the company has

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published a unique item that, happily, isn't simply a neat gimmick, but an innovative and fascinating work of art in its own right.

What they've done is taken two of Candas Jane Dorsey's near-future stories which originally saw print in Lesley Choyce's *Arc of Ice* anthology (Pottersfield Press, 1992) and Dorsey's own collection, *Machine Sex and Other Stories* (Press Porcepic, 1988) and reprinted them in a lovely little booklet the size of a CD. Why that size? Well, they've added to the package a CD containing Dorsey's reading of the two stories at Edmonton's First Night Festival, with moody electronic musical soundscapes behind her voice provided by musician Roger Deegan. Deegan also provides a nine-minute musical interlude on his own.

The combination of Dorsey's warm voice and Deegan's eerie music makes a perfect backdrop for the stories. Listening to them (I'd suggest you put on some earphones and turn off the lights; let the world carry on by itself for an hour or so), one is transported to the dark future landscape peopled by Dorsey's very human characters in a far more effective manner than that of any sf movie produced in Hollywood.

The whole thing fits into an environmentally friendly cardboard package that folds out a couple of times so that the CD won't come falling out when you open it, but also provides the boards for a little "hardcover" chapbook.

I might also mention that Tesseract's regular mass market editions (such as the recent collection *On Spec, The First Five Years*) are a little classier than the usual paperback, with white heavy stock for the pages and even small runs of hardcovers (mass market size) for the collectors' market. If your local bookstore isn't carrying their books, you can write for a catalogue to: Tesseract Books, 3rd Floor, 10022 103 St., Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, T5J 0X2.

Companions of the Night, by Vivian Vande Velde, Jane Yolen Books, 1995, 224pp, $17.00 Hardcover

With Halloween sneaking up on us, goblined and fanged and all, it seems appropriate to have a look at a darker offering and Vivian Velde's *Companions of the Night* fits the bill admirably. It's a YA novel, but don't let that put you off. Some of the best books come out of the YA field, and you can't fault them for their packaging — this one sports a gorgeous painting by Cliff Nielson. But the story inside is what concerns us and it has a great set-up.

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Sixteen-year-old Kerry Nowicki finds herself driving back to a twenty-four-hour laundromat late at night, sent by her four-year-old brother who forgot his teddy bear there earlier in the day. It seems a simple enough request and Kerry has no problem finding the bear. The trouble starts when she encounters three men in the laundromat about to kill a young man she later learns is named Ethan. Complicating matters, one of the three is the owner of the establishment, so there's no hope for rescue on that front. Further complicating matters, they think Ethan's a vampire — and decide that perhaps Kerry is one, too.

Things go from bad to worse. Kerry and Ethan escape, but it turns out that Ethan really is a vampire and when Kerry's family is kidnapped by a friend of the three men (now deceased, courtesy of Ethan, who returned to deal with them after taking Kerry home), she finds herself the vampire's reluctant accomplice as they try to discover the identity of the man and kill him before he does the same to them and her family. Except maybe Ethan's not really telling the truth. Maybe he has plans for her that aren't of a particularly friendly nature. And so maybe she's on the wrong side.

Velde's take on vampires isn't all that innovative, but she comes up aces for her brisk prose, engaging characters and a plot that keeps you quickly turning the pages right up to the very end. And she does have some nice touches with the vampires — how they leave email for each other and the like.

The book is high on tension and suspense, graphic where such is required (though not as in-your-face as, say, Christopher Pike) and definitely not simply for younger readers. All you'll need to enjoy it is to care about believable characters and the stories that arise from how they interact.

Batman: The Ultimate Evil, by Andrew Vachss, Warner Aspect, 1995, 184pp, $19.95, Hardcover

Normally I wouldn't take up column space with work-for-hire projects such as *Star Trek* continuations, novelizations of films, or projects like the one under discussion here. It's not because I disagree with them, or think any the less of the authors involved or the people who read them. The authors know what they're getting into when they take on the project, the readers have fun and I'm not about to rain on anybody's parade. Life's too short. It's more that these books already have a built-in audience, so there doesn't seem to be a whole lot of

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point in my drawing attention to them unless there's something special about them.

Case in point: Andrew Vachss writing a Batman novel.

As might be expected by those familiar with Vachss's work, both fictional and in the courtroom, his reasons for taking on this project are more complex than simply delving under the mask of Bob Kane's creation, although he does do so as well, and most fascinatingly. But the real reason Vachss has taken this on is to reach another audience for his message than he might normally reach, and to provide a forum for a new aspect of his battle against child abuse.

First the story. In Vachss's hands, Batman takes on a repugnant aspect of the southeast Asian tourist industry, the one that makes it a safe harbor for predatory pedophiles from all over the world to engage in their pastimes while the police and government turn a blind eye. In Vachss's fictional Udon Khai, sex with children is legal and children are sold for money on a regular basis, making it a literal hell on earth for the victims, most of whom never survive their childhood, or do so irreparably scarred.

Through journals left for him by his mother, who, it turns out, was herself an investigator of child abusers, the Batman comes to realize that he's been fighting the results of evil, not the evil itself. He embarks upon his mission to the heart of this ultimate evil with perhaps predictable results, returning to Gotham scarred by what he has seen and had to endure, but he is now a darker and, if anything, fiercer protector of the innocent than ever before.

Unfortunately, the real world doesn't have a Batman. But that doesn't mean we have to stand by and watch the monsters and freaks take over the world.

Not so long ago, Vachss was instrumental in lobbying Congress to pass what came to be known as the Oprah Bill — the creation of a nationwide registry of child abuse offenders — proving that we do have a voice and it will be heard. Not on its own, perhaps, but if we join together and enough of us make noise, we can make a difference.

Now Vachss is involved in an effort to stop the "kiddie sex" tourism business in Thailand.

This book, and a graphic novel simultaneously released by D.C. Comics, tell a fictional story to illuminate the problem, but both versions also carry an afterword by investigative reporter David Hechler detailing the very real facts of child sex tourism in Thailand. And both end with a call to arms for how we

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can help: a boycott on anything made or manufactured in Thailand, because if Thailand sells its children for money, then the only thing that will stop them is the loss of money.

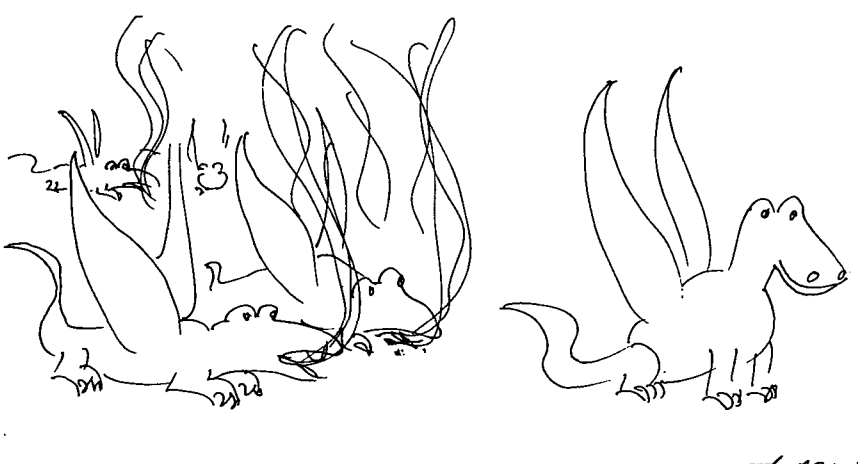
There is no list of products affected. All that's asked is that the next time you're about to buy a product that might originate in Thailand — figurines fashioned from superhero comics or cartoons, video games, sneakers, Thai silk, even mutual funds that trade in Thai securities — check the manufacturer's label, think about these children and if the item or parts of it originate in Thailand, then don't buy it. Because if we don't help them, who will?

For more information, or simply to register your support, contact:

Don't! Buy! Thai!
328 Flatbush Ave., Suite 311
Brooklyn, NY 11238
USA

A mythical figure such as the Batman can't fight the real battles for us; only we can.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.



"The sole survivor among us of the great American smoke out."

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Richard Bowes' Kevin Grierson stories have become a popular feature in F&SF. *They've also been reprinted in* The Best from Fantasy & Science Fiction, *and in* The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, *edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling. The stories are set in New York City, and Bowes' affection for the city shows in every word.*

About the story, he writes, "I wrote fashion copy on Seventh Avenue in the late sixties....That stretch of Seventh is now called Fashion Avenue. But the roiling, vulgar, sometimes glamorous, oddly cozy world of the Garment District with its vast herds of clothing racks and huge department stores catering to a mass clientele is fading away. Darlington's would by now be gone."

At Darlington's

By Richard Bowes

i.

ON A JANUARY MONDAY, I stared at the twenty-two-year-old disaster in the mirror. A lump behind my ear was painful to the touch. It was eight-thirty in the morning and I wasn't dressed. "Hey," said a voice only I could hear. "The choir boy from hell."

As a kid, I called my secret double my Shadow. We had an on and off relationship. That morning he wore the very same neo-Edwardian suit and wide tie I'd worn on Friday night when I told him to get lost for good.

"The rent is two months overdue and you're already late for work," he said. "You don't have the nerve for a life in advertising or crime. So, it's up to me to save our asses." As I watched, he gulped mouthwash, ran his hands through his hair, and wiped a trace of methadrine off his nose. We still didn't need to shave much and at first glance he wouldn't look like someone who had slept in his clothes.

Usually he stayed so far inside me that I wasn't even aware of him. Sometimes he spoke like a whisper my ear. On tense occasions he would

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appear right beside me. Occasionally other people had seen that and asked if we were twins. But never before had he tried to take my place.

As I moved to block his way, he pulled on my overcoat and asked, "No word from the draft board?" The reminder stopped me dead. My Selective Service classification had been 1-A since I left school the year before. This worried even my Shadow.

Years later a wise man called him my Silent Partner, said he was my addiction. But even before that I knew who he was. We both did. "I am all your bad habits," my Shadow said as he walked out the door, "And you are mine. Get some rest."

He had seen to it that I got well medicated the night before. So even though there had been a coup, I was relieved to crawl back into my dark cave of a bedroom. To lull myself, I invoked a memory of a laughing baby held up against the sky. It was a kind of magic charm as I rolled between sleep and waking, catching glimpses of the world through my Shadow's eyes.

Miraculously, he got onto the subway with a *New York Times* in his hand. Had he paid? I watched him scan the pages. My stuff appeared in the daily papers.

He found something I'd had a hand in writing. It wound like haiku past elongated drawings of an ultra mod young couple:

FASHION KICKS
AS 1966
WELCOMES '67
AT DARLINGTON'S
...BUT YOU KNEW THAT

By dark magic and luck, my Shadow got up to Herald Square before nine. Fresh-faced, bleary-eyed employees flowed out of the subway into Macy's, into Gimbels. He cut his way west against the tide from Penn Station, past porters loading the last turrets of Santa's castle onto a truck.

As he must have seen me do, my Shadow turned and passed under a sign:

ON THE CORNER
OF SEVENTH AVENUE
AND THE WORLD

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DARLINGTON'S...
BUT YOU KNEW THAT

Inside the employees' entrance, a guy yelled, "Watch it, Bub!" Technicolor stripes enveloped my Shadow. Black and red, blue and white, purple and gold, a psychedelic zebra herd. In a lyric flight tempered by a strict character count I had written about these very miniskirts:

ABOVE THE KNEE!
BEYOND FASHION LAW!

Dodging moving racks, my Shadow stepped onto an elevator. A trio of sales ladies practiced looking right through him as they got off on three. Assistant men's suit buyers walked off on six talking basketball. Ten was Advertising and Promotion. My Shadow arrived there at the stroke of nine and I could not have managed that.

In New York it was winter but on Ten it was spring. Easter promotion artwork was stacked in the reception area, along the halls. Umbrella sized cardboard flowers, colored eggs that must have been laid by Rocs were everywhere. But no people; the place was deserted, eerie.

In the copywriters' office, the phone on my desk rang. As my Shadow moved to answer it, a meeting broke up in the conference room. Then it occurred to me that this was the day of the Spring Fashion Presentation, a big deal with all the buyers attending. Everyone in advertising was supposed to have shown up at eight-thirty in the morning with a bunch of punchy promotional ideas. I had missed the meeting, had in fact no punchy ideas. I was doomed.

The phone rang again and my Shadow slipped off my overcoat, grabbed the receiver and said aloud, "Darlington's. Fashion Copy. Kevin Grierson."

"Copy!" a man yelled. "I'll give you copy." It was Wiggy Glickman, the Misses' and Juniors' blouse buyer, a middle-aged fanatic. "LODEN! I'm reading LODEN!"

The conference room door opened and everybody, copywriters, artists, stylists, began filing out. Some stared with curiosity and not a little malice.

"In the *Daily News* yesterday," Wiggy screamed, "'Lovely flared sleeved elegance in Pearl, Turquoise, Ocean, Ebony, AND LODEN.' That was you left that in the copy?"

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It had been me. "Not really," said my Shadow very calmly.

"SHMUCK! I told you Loden is something guys wear when they're out in the woods. Ladies wear jade. JADE!"

Les Steibler, the art director, elegant, balding, all smiles and show biz, came out of the meeting, caught sight of what he took to be me and rolled his eyes in dismay. "Good old Les here will help us," my Shadow murmured and looked like a lost waif.

Glancing back to make sure that Jackie Maye, our boss, wasn't watching, Les gave brisk orders. "Randy, for one last time, a change of clothes for Baby Face Nelson here. We know his sizes all too well. Tell Barbara we need a complete makeover. Connie, make sure the studio isn't in use. Go, Kevin."

Turning, taking the phone, he said brightly, "Les here!" Then, "Wigs, such language! What, I missed something on the news? Loden riots?"

Connie was the production assistant, the lowliest of the low. For a few months the year before that had been my job. Tiny, cute, she led my Shadow to the studio at the other end of the floor. In the shooting area stood a dozen naked mannequins, pink and faceless, arms akimbo. "Luv Dolls," my Shadow whispered and laughed when he felt me cringe at a certain memory.

Makeovers were a specialty of Advertising and Promotion. I had availed myself of them more than once. My Shadow knew the routine. The changing room had a shower. He opened his tie, unbuttoned his shirt.

"Jackie Maye was furious that you weren't at the meeting," said Connie. She was after my job. "Jackie told me to work up an Accessories presentation. But Les made excuses, said he was sure you'd come across with great copy ideas."

"Yeah, I was up till four last night working on them," said the Shadow as Connie handed him a towel and retreated.

"Disaster! I haven't got anything to show," I whined. "I'm going to be fired."

As he undressed, my Shadow pulled a small package out of a jacket pocket, snorted some crystal methadrine and put it away again. Amused, he turned on the water. "Poor little Kevin went all to pieces at a party. Remember?"

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ii.

SUDDENLY, I DID. That Friday night, I had wound up in a loft on a deserted street near Madison Square. The decor was black and white. Flickering lights gave everything a silent film effect as the Garment District and Max's Kansas City, the world of fashion and the Warhol Factory, linked.

"They rounded up the usual crew of perverts," a thin guy in a flashy suit remarked. He seemed to be someone I knew. With no idea of what he was talking about, but aware that he was the source of the speed, I smiled.

"Mr. Accessory Before the Fact, that's me," the man in the flashy suit had said. "Yeah! Guilty as charged." He too was ripped. Something about his nose and eyes gave him the look of a falcon. All that was certain in my world was that I had been drinking and snorting since lunch. Speed swam underneath the thin ice of gin. "Let's go see the Luv Dolls, Kev."

Somewhere downstairs, at another party or an annex of the same one, Mr. Accessory Before the Fact spoke to a guy on a landing, slipped him bills. Halfway down a hall, I looked into a gauzily lighted room.

Inside, a john in a suit knelt on a mattress. Looking over his shoulder, I saw slim legs, firm breasts, a fan of long black hair, a kid with eyes so blown that light seemed to shine through to the back of her head. I was wired enough to be turned on.

Then her gaze, empty as a mannequin's, transfixed me. At rare points in my intoxication came a moment I called The Eye of the Storm. Not sobriety, but a remote, godlike calm. The john and the room got as distant as the view through the wrong end of binoculars.

At such moments I was omniscient. I knew the girl's whole story: sixteen, new in town from Ohio and getting passed around, the young lady was told about a party, then found she was the party. Waking up tomorrow was not going to be nice.

Mr. Accessory asked, "Is this the one for you?" But once I knew who she was, the scene revolted me. All I wanted was to escape. Turning, I found my Shadow standing beside me smiling, blocking my escape.

Mr. Accessory did a goggle-eyed double take. "Do you have a twin brother, Kevin?" he asked my Shadow.

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Before my icy, remote state of mind faded I said, "Stay away from me. For good."

"See you around, Fred," my Shadow called as I headed down the stairs.

iii.

Monday morning at Darlington's, fashion stylists and junior artists popped into the fitting room bright as elves. My Shadow emerged from the shower wrapped in a towel and asked teasingly, "Could I get some privacy?"

"NO!" They clustered around, fascinated by this usurper as they never seemed to be by me. "How are you feeling, Kev?"

Les appeared carrying a folder. "Are you feeling Kevin?" He moved his hand in front of my Shadow's eyes to see if they tracked.

"Jockeys and socks, Kevin. Nobody wearing second day socks can look another person in the eye."

As he slipped into the clothes, people handed my Shadow talc and Binaca, deodorant and Alka-Seltzer. "Powder them buns!"

"Drops to take the red out of the eyes."

"But nothing on earth will get rid of the glaze."

"I want to see him in this striped Carnaby Street shirt."

"I want to see him just in black shoes and bow tie!"

"For minimal cash up front I'm sure that can be arranged," Les said. "Okay. Everyone back to work."

When the two of them were alone, he handed my Shadow a folder. "This artwork I did for your presentation? You left it on your desk over the weekend, didn't you? We were supposed to get together Saturday, remember?" He sounded mad. "I must have called you a dozen times."

"What is he, our mother?" my Shadow wondered. But once again he gave the lost waif look. At home, I squirmed at the cheap ploy. Worse, it didn't even work.

"Get your coat." Les turned and walked away. "There's an outdoor shoot. It was arranged that you go as my assistant instead of Connie. To keep you out of Jackie Maye's sight."

I was in despair. But my Shadow shot his cuffs and murmured, "See the trouble I have to get you out of."

When he went to my desk for the overcoat, Connie was working on an

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Accessories layout. "Kevin," she said. "Message from Sarah. Lunch at twelve-thirty at Schlep's."

My fellow junior copywriters were amused. Sure that I was going to fall flat on my face, each of them was also doubtless working on Accessories presentations. "Does Les know about Sarah?" asked one.

"Does Macy's tell Gimbels?"

"A ménage for every taste."

"At Darlington's..."

"But you knew that!" they chorused. Suddenly, everyone was very busy. My Shadow turned and faced Jackie Maye directly for the first time.

Almost six feet tall, a kind of goddess, Jackie had modeled for Dior back before the war. She used an ivory cigarette holder and wore a hat in the office as if at any moment she might have to fly off to a fashion show. Twenty years before, she had coined the slogan, "Darlington's...but you knew that." Les had told me the whole story, how it became a tag line, something Milton Berle would say when a second banana asked where he got his dresses and picture hats.

Jackie's off-center smile could enchant and it was on full force for the pair of Italian designers who were with her. It faded slightly when she saw my Shadow. With the absolute courage that comes with being ripped, he stepped forward and made the gesture of handing her the folder with Les's sketches as if it was his presentation.

My heart jumped. There wasn't a word of copy in there. But, just as he had gambled, Jackie Maye walked past him remarking, "Meshuggener!" For the benefit of her guests, she translated that from the Yiddish as "Eccentric creative staff."

My Shadow told me, "You got to keep them guessing." Les awaited him, wearing a handsome topcoat and an unusually serious expression. "This," murmured my Shadow, "is going to be painful." Instead of taking an elevator, Les walked downstairs to the selling floors.

Nine was Linens: cloud banks of sheets, blue fields of bath mats, the scent of cedar chests. My Shadow gave a bored sigh as they went to the escalator. "We do this to see which of our ads are selling merchandise," Les explained, still trying to teach me the business.

"Les Steibler, the Rembrandt of Ready-mades, Picasso of the Paris knock-off," my Shadow murmured to me. "He's been here so long, he really cares about this crap."

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They floated down through the post-Christmas aroma of stale candy canes in Children's and Toys, the leather and after-shave of Men's Wear, a melange of fragrances from sachet to Chanel from the Tailored Lady Shoppe, the Bridal Boutique, Lingerie, Misses, and Juniors. "I know you don't make much now, Kevin. No one does at first. But you can in a few years."

"Yuch," said my Shadow. "Homilies from wise Auntie Les."

That soon after the holidays, shoppers were few and feral. Sales people called back and forth to each other as they arranged their shelves, an occasional bell bonged to summon a buyer, porter or security.

As they made the majestic thirty foot descent to the main floor Les said, "Saturday night I spotted you on Third Avenue." At home, I tensed. "You were too far gone to notice me. I tell you this because I care about you. I'm a hardened New Yorker, but what I saw really disturbed me."

My Shadow hung his head in what might have been shame. "The cheap voyeur," he whispered. "What was he doing in that neighborhood?"

Their way out of Darlington's lay past slender gold pillars hung with jewelry, past tables on which marched serried ranks of single high heels. Les said, "You need some kind of help, Kevin."

With the bright insincerity that ends all conversation, my Shadow said, "I think you're right."

Les shrugged and said, "Well, I tried," and was silent on the short cab hop over to Sixth Avenue and Twenty-Seventh Street.

Wiggy Glickman, the Junior's and Misses' Blouse Buyer, was already waiting at the curb. The moment he saw Les he set up a wail. "PLEATS, Steibler. Fifty thousand blouses we got coming in all with pleated fronts. The treatment today has got to be flowing feminine, flattering."

"Ten in the morning and you're worried about pleats?"

"The artwork I've seen is like men's dress shirts worn by the Beatles. Like your friend here," he gestured at my Shadow. "A nice boy, I'm sure."

My Shadow said quite clearly, "Tell the old pervert to buzz off."

"What are you on?" Les asked quietly. "Just so I can avoid it." Then aloud, "Wigs! Such poetry! Flowing, feminine flattery! Plus sets of knockers that'll give you a heart attack."

My Shadow muttered, "Where does Les get off being self-righteous? He's peddling his ass hard right now."

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We were in the heart of the Flower District, blocks lined with wholesale florists. One of them had contracted to set up potted trees and hothouse blossoms on the sidewalk in front of his shop.

It wasn't frigid. But it was January and they were shooting spring fashions. Truck drivers honked and whistled at girls in goosebumps and blouses pinned up to emphasize the flowing, feminine pleats.

Even the plants shivered. To emphasize the vernal theme a lamb had been hired. Between shots its handler wrapped the animal in a wool blanket. A young lady with the face of an angel was supposed to hold it on a leash. She sneezed and exclaimed, "Gawd damn that sheep!"

"Kevin! Kleenex!" Les yelled.

"This is a prize-winning Exmore lamb," the handler snapped.

My Shadow was kept busy which made him sullen. In a free moment he went into the store's rest room and snorted some more speed. When he got back, they were breaking for lunch. The florist was yelling because the lamb had eaten a fern. "Whose idea was the Extra More sheep?" Wigs wanted to know.

"Kevin's," said Les and it was certain that I couldn't rely on his protection anymore.

That's when my Shadow remembered his date with Sarah. He was flat broke. "Can I borrow two dollars?" he asked Les.

Handing it over without even looking his way, Les said, "Your usual fee, right?"

My Shadow crossed Broadway against the lights in the midst of a fast-moving convoy of racks laden with women's coats. I told him, "You're wrecking my life."

"Me! Remember the dead drill sergeant Sunday morning?"

iv.

Like a reflex, the lump behind my ear throbbed and I recalled gray dawn light, an unfamiliar room, a guy in khaki sprawled motionless on the bed. All I knew was that the night before he had made a very bad mistake with me.

Memory of my path to that room was sketchy. All day Saturday, I had used cheap vodka and tap water to nurse a gruesome hangover. The Eye of the Storm had passed. I was broke and my speed edge from the party the night before had turned to black depression.

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My Shadow's absence felt more like an amputation than a release. The only mail was a couple of very overdue bills, nothing from the draft board. The thought of the army unnerved me. It was where I would be unraveled and dismembered.

Later, I must have gone out because the next thing I remembered happened that night on Third Avenue in the Fifties. That was a place I often went when drunk and broke. A voice called, "Fred!" It was a big, bald guy with a mustache. I didn't recognize him. But if he knew that name we had done business in the past.

In my Upper East Side riff I was Fred, on the run from family and high school troubles. It was a tale that could move me to tears. Since coming to New York I had worked it for profit on the nice blocks of the Upper East Side. But time took its toll. I noticed that bars didn't much ask me for proof of being eighteen anymore.

A blank time followed his picking me up. Then deep in the night, I emerged from an ambulatory blackout to find myself in a white, tile-lined room. A shower ran. A big guy I didn't remember, a stranger in khaki, poked my bare chest and shouted, "You're gonna get some military discipline, boy!"

It was like he had pulled a trigger. My nightmare wasn't the Viet Cong, it was being murdered in basic training. I threw myself on him. He yelled, "Fucking street trash!" and slammed my head against the door. Everything went red and all sound was an echo as I went for his throat.

Early Sunday morning, I had come to face down on a thick carpet. The shower still ran in the bathroom. A shiver that turned into a convulsion passed through me. All of me hurt when I started to get up. But the back of my head throbbed so much that my eyes teared.

When I finally managed to focus, I saw the bed and on it, all akimbo and dead still, a big guy dressed in khaki. There were bruises on his neck. His head was at a weird angle. He must have decided to run a fantasy called drill sergeant and punk recruit. Maybe he had even explained that to me.

Had I left fingerprints? Had anyone seen me? My clothes were on a chair. My head spun as I dressed. Something in the room moved. Another shiver seized me. When I looked, two eyes, red, startled, stared back. "Oh no!" He sounded scared. "Take what you want. But please go!"

Monday I blocked that memory with the image of a child laughing

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against an overcast sky. "You are a menace," my Shadow said. "Clearly we need another racket."

v.

WITH THAT he stepped into the roar of Schactman's Kosher Dairy. By legend the restaurant had started as a hole in the wall serving lowly schleppers, haulers of goods. Thus the nickname, "Schlep's."

Two generations later it offered high and low, Jew and Goy, generous portions and the rudest service in the Garment District. The place was huge, a maze of alcoves.

Sarah Callendar wasn't hard to spot. In the dead of winter, her skin and hair seemed magically touched with the sun. Others noticed her too, in that neighborhood. As much for the white and navy A-line Courrèges knockoff she wore as for her looks.

She was married and had a kid. But I predated husband and child. We had known each other since college. As a fashion coordinator at Macy's she was several steps up the ladder. But we shared the feeling of being undercover agents, spies from downtown.

When she and my Shadow hugged, Sarah looked puzzled. She knew something was wrong. This wasn't me. But though she was very bright and had gotten a few clues over the years, my double was something she didn't want to know about. And Sarah had the ability not to know.

"I thought we were going to look at your presentation this weekend."

The anger and concern in her voice pleased my Shadow. Only ones who love you feel those things at the same time. "Hey, I saw the two Scotts out for a walk Sunday," he said to change the subject.

It worked. At the mention of her kid, Sarah brightened immediately. "I wanted you to see. Yesterday, Scotty took six steps before he realized what he was doing and sat down."

I felt a twinge at missing that. She paused like there was something she wanted to talk about. But she never mentioned troubles with Scott Senior, her husband. And since Scott was mainly about trouble, we never discussed him.

Just then the waitress appeared. "This the one you were waiting for, sweetie?" she asked with disbelief. "What will it be, mister?"

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Both my Shadow's stomach and mine lurched at the thought of food. Schlep's, of course, served no booze, doubtless one reason Sarah wanted to meet there. He managed to order tea and cheesecake. She produced an envelope. "I had some ideas for you."

"Thanks. Here's some of what I have." He spread Les's mockups of scarf, belt, hose, handbag, hat, jewelry ads, like they were his own.

Speed had put a tiny tremor in his hands. Sarah simply didn't see that. "What's your theme?" she asked.

My Shadow gave her an idea I had worked on the night before:

ACCESSORIES
AFTER THE FACT
ABOVE THE LAW

As soon as he said that, he and Sarah shook their heads. She held up a pair of her sketches, one of a Victorian lady encased in clothes, the other of a lithe young woman in a miniskirt. "The idea is that fashion used to be something permanent, leaden, immobile, unfun."

"Then came the revolution!" said my Shadow.

ACCESSORIES COUP D'ETAT
LIBERATING THE INNER YOU

It amused him that the talk about coups and the inner you made me squirm.

"What are you going to say about belts?" she asked. All that I had thought of was:

A SOLID BELT

Because the line evoked for me a double shot of bourbon. My mouth watered. When I concentrated on Sarah and my Shadow again, they had a mockup of an ad with the headline in the shape of an S.

"Something like 'Suave, sensuous,'" he said.

"Lithe," she said, "Gliding. Like a snake."

At its best, copywriting could be as amusing as a game. Her tuna salad

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and his cheesecake were delivered and eaten absentmindedly. They sat with their heads side by side. One of Sarah's sketches for hats had a very family face in it.

My Shadow saw it too. "Sketch in a cigarette holder," he said. "The headline is, 'The hat came back!'"

She said, "Like Mother swore it would."

"AT DARLINGTON'S...BUT YOU KNOW THAT!" said my Shadow. "We need one more line."

Suddenly a familiar voice asked, "Why's a nice Irish boy like you doing in a place like this?" The tall thin man with the nose and eyes of a falcon, Mr. Accessory from the Friday night party, stared at Sarah while asking me, "You're keeping that offer in mind?"

My Shadow smiled and nodded. Mr. Accessory turned away saying, "See you at the presentation."

Sarah looked at his back with distaste and asked, "Who was that sleaze?"

"Stephens," said my Shadow and I remembered the name too. "The hotshot new buyer at Darlington's. Big man in leather." Before she could ask what offer Stephens was talking about, my Shadow said, "We need to get back to work."

I understood that he needed to go take more meth; maybe Sarah too. "Give my regards to the Scotts," my Shadow said when the two of them kissed and parted. It was too bad that in return for all Sarah's love and understanding I regularly betrayed our friendship. Thinking of that, I remembered Sunday.

vi.

My head rang right along with the bells. I was over on Avenue B. Spanish families walked home from church. In my pockets were bills scooped off the drill sergeant's dresser and a pint of Smirnoff's vodka bought out the back door of Old Stanley's.

My nerves twitched, but my brain was still numb after my bad awakening. With chemical energy I thought I could work on my presentation. But it seemed the dealers had all gone to spend Sunday with their mothers. Then a familiar voice called, "Hey, Grierson! Kevin!"

Turning, I saw a big blond guy pushing this beautiful baby in a stroller: Scott Callendar father and son.

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I guess the father's looks were what Sarah had seen. And he generated a certain excitement. He was a preppy hood who liked to ride motorcycles and couldn't hold a job. His appetite for booze and drugs was boundless.

But the son! I had never really been around a baby. I crouched down face to face with him and he smiled. I would have loved to have seen him walk for the first time, just so some little piece of that weekend could be soft. The kid touched my face and gurgled. The father asked, "You looking?"

Like I didn't want the kid to see me say it, I stood up. My mouth didn't work very well. "Yeah."

And he said, "Twenty-five bucks for a spoon and I'll take a third." Scott Callendar was also a thief. Desperate, I nodded yes. Foggily, I thought I would mind the kid and he would make the run.

Before I could make that into words, he asked his son, "Scotso want to take a ride?" The kid clapped his hands. As Scott turned the stroller I remembered it was an article of faith on the street that cops would not bust anybody with a kid. Knowing Scotty should not be touched by this, I still went along.

It was a chilly day, already getting dark. Scott turned down a tenement block. Ahead of us, a skinny guy with long, lank hair went into a building. Scott lifted the stroller onto the stoop.

Finally I managed to speak. "Man, this is not cool." Scott looked questioningly. "I'm staying here with the kid."

As soon as the father disappeared inside, Scotty looked around and started to cry. As I crouched down to him, a woman, Polish or Ukrainian, wearing a babushka and overcoat like it was cold in her apartment, stuck her head out the ground floor window. She looked at Scott, then stared at me like I was dirt. "Maybe he's wet or something," I suggested.

"He wants to be held," she said in a voice like doom. "Pick him up. What kind of father?" Then she ducked back inside. She was right. When I picked him up, Scotty stopped crying. But he stared at me wide-eyed, ready for a howl.

"Here. This." The woman gestured us closer. With the fingers of one hand, she broke a lump of sugar, reached out the window and put a piece on the kid's tongue. The sweetness calmed him. I held Scotty up in the air, against the gray sky, and he looked down at me and smiled.

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At that moment I had felt the most intense love. Suddenly it seemed a simple thing to walk away from my tangled life. Before his father came back, I would take Scotty away, call Sarah and ask her to meet us somewhere. I'd tell her the awful thing that her husband had just done. Of course, I'd have to tell her my own lousy part in it. But at least it would be the truth. I had the stroller down on the sidewalk when Scott Senior reappeared.

vii.

"BUT," SAID my Shadow, amused at my stupidity, "once he waved the speed, you handed the kid right back to him." He was doing pasteups, working fast. "Nice intentions burn away when you got a habit like ours."

The presentations were given in the conference room. Each copywriter in turn stood up in front of Jackie, Les, and the merchandise buyers involved, showed their ads and read their copy. Afterward they all offered comments. That afternoon, artwork, pictures of miniskirts, silver boots, striped bell bottoms with fringed cuffs, got hauled into the room and carted back out.

Accessories came last. As my Shadow rose, Mr. Stephens walked past with a half wink. "The fix," said my Shadow, "is on. But you put us on such shaky ground that only that and luck can save us." He strode in front of the audience, strung taut as a wire on the last of the meth. He set up his boards on a display easel, looked around the room and said:

DARLINGTON'S AND YOU,
ACCESSORIES BEFORE THE FACT
...AND AFTERWARD

It was hard to tell how it was going over. Jackie Maye sat to one side of my Shadow, Les looked right through him. Mr. Stephens had a smile so bright it was radioactive. Jewelry came first. At one point my Shadow said:

A FASHION COUP D'ETAT
UNLEASHES THE INNER YOU

Old Jess Gambelian the Jewelry buyer seemed to like that. At any rate he

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woke up and nodded, though English was not his first language, probably not even in the first five. Hosiery, handbags, scarves, shoes all got dealt with. Every trick I knew, my Shadow used. As part of the belt promotion there was the snakelike shape that read:

SO SMOOTH
&
L
I
T
H
E
SO SLEEK
&
S
U
A
V
IT'S SUEDE

He delivered the lines with a hiss. Jackie's eyes gleamed, amused either by the act or at the fool he was making of himself. Mr. Stephens, whose department included belts, nodded approval.

It went okay as a performance. Hats were last. My Shadow put his final art up on the easel. This was a gamble; Sarah's sketch of the woman in the hat, with a cigarette holder, was a good-natured caricature of Jackie Maye herself. The copy read:

THE HAT CAME BACK!
LIKE MOTHER SAID IT WOULD!
AT DARLINGTON'S...BUT YOU KNEW THAT!

People understood, they looked toward Jackie to see if she found it amusing. My Shadow paused and delivered the punchline:

EVEN UNCLE MILTY KNEW THAT!

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Finally, people chuckled. That was the finale. Jackie looked Les's way. He grimaced. "Amusing I guess. But what's he selling?" It was clear to all that Les had written me off.

There was a moment's pause when everything hung in the balance. Then Mr. Stephens spoke. "Great! Punchy copy! Nice look to the handbag and belt pages!"

He turned to the other buyers. A couple of them shrugged. It was a presentation like a thousand others. But Jesse Gambelian suddenly awoke again and said in his unique accent, "Good. Good! I like the Cadillac tie in. Darlington's is a Cadillac store."

Even my Shadow seemed baffled. "You said, 'A fashion Coupe de Ville,'" Gambelian explained. "You gotta work the car into the art, though." My Shadow nodded vigorously and made a note.

It was well after five. Other buyers were willing to file their comments later. People began to leave. My Shadow picked up the artwork and started to follow them. "Hold it a minute, Mr. Grierson." And he was alone in the room with Jackie Maye.

She gestured for him to put up the last sketch again. While fitting a cigarette in the holder, she looked first at the caricature and then at him. When she spoke, her words flowed out on a cloud of smoke. "Your presentation was light on substance, but the buyers seemed to okay the presentation. And in this business the client is always right."

Barnard and Brooklyn mingled in her voice. "You've been around here long enough to know what chutzpa is?" He nodded and she said, "Well, I have had precisely enough of yours. Come in here one more time like you did this morning and you're out on your ass." She indicated the sketch. "Change that art. Nobody outside the business knows me. But keep that Milton Berle reference. Good night."

We had held the job. I was dizzy with relief. Advertising and Promotion was almost deserted. Someone working late typed down the hall. Mr. Stephens, aka Mr. Accessory, waited at the elevator. "Give you a lift?"

While the two of them caught a cab downtown, I was full of plans for my recovery. I wouldn't use drugs. Or booze. I'd be at work at a quarter of nine. I'd apologize to Les. "You thought over the deal we talked about?" Mr. Accessory asked my Shadow.

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"Yeah," said my Shadow. "I need to supplement my paycheck. I'd like to take my share in product. In fact I could use some tonight." Mr. Accessory nodded.

"What deal?" I wanted to know.

"He has speed connections all around the country. What he needs is for someone to bring it here."

"I could get busted!"

"Very unlikely. In a suit we still look respectable."

Mr. Accessory said, "You could walk through any airport in the world with your bags crammed full of speed. And everybody will think you're a kid visiting his family."

My Shadow smiled and said, "A guy from a nice family would have matching Luis Vuitton bags." As his partner thought that over, he told me, "If worse comes to worst, Scott Callendar can unload those along with some of the speed."

As the cab barreled nearer, I told my Shadow, "Stay away from me. This time I mean it."

viii.

Sunday, far into the night, I snorted speed and drank beer, wandered my apartment trying in a frantic haze to get my mind fastened on ad copy. The place was strewn with scraps of paper on which were scrawled stuff like:

DARLINGTON'S AND YOU
ACCESSORIES
AFTER THE FACT

When the drugs ran out, memories of the Luv Doll, the Drill Sergeant bobbed around in my head. Only Scott laughing against the sky didn't make me wince. I held onto that magic image.

But by four in the morning, not even that worked. When the doorbell rang, I knew who it had to be. I buzzed my Shadow up. He was amused when he saw me. "I got something to make you relax." It was heroin. I shied away.

"Cool out, man." His tone was soft, coaxing. "The worse the addiction, the easier the cure. There are more guys walking around who have shed drug

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habits than ones who have stopped biting their nails." The next thing I knew, he was going to work in my place.

ix.

That evening, from my bedroom, I heard the apartment door open, the two of them walk in. "I can make the first run this week if you want," my Shadow said. He turned on a rock station. A bunch of English saps sang about Winchester Cathedral. He said, "Let me get changed."

My Shadow came into the room and I was standing waiting for him. "Disappear," I whispered. "Out of my life. And take Mr. Accessory with you."

In his hands were opened letters. "You want to be Kevin Grierson? Good. Here's a notice from the landlord. But don't worry, you won't need an apartment. Or a job. Here." His tremor made the paper rattle. "Nine tomorrow morning, pre-induction physical at Whitehall Street followed by a bus ride to Fort Dix."

The news froze me. "You'll be too scared to resist. Bring a toothbrush. Decide where you want them to mail your clothes. By this time Tuesday...." He ruffled my hair like he was clipping it, then walked over and sank down on the bed.

He said, "You're dumb enough to deserve all that. But it would be the end of both of us. I can take care of tomorrow. Like I did today. But it's not true that evil never sleeps. Right now I need a rest. Make yourself useful. Go talk to our friend about his plans."

Before I could reply, Mr. Accessory called, "Hey, Kev, want a hit?"

Yes. I did. The voice behind me whispered, "It will take more than babies in the sky to untangle us, Kevin." When I turned, the bed was empty and I was alone in the room.

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John Clute, in his entry about her in The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, *says Kit Reed "at her best is, very quietly, an explosive writer." What a wonderful description of a wonderful writer, who first appeared in these pages in 1958. She has published some classics in the sf field as well as some powerful works in other genres. Her novels, written under the pseudonym Kit Craig, have appeared on* The New York Times *bestseller list.*

She returns to F&SF *after too long an absence with "The Singing Marine."*

The Singing Marine

By Kit Reed

IT'S SO HOT IN AUGUST IN that part of Virginia that dogs die standing up and even insects stick to the asphalt. Flies buzz in place. Embedded, an overturned stag beetle waves its legs helplessly. The singing Marine has to move fast to keep his boondockers from sinking in and gluing him to the spot.

He may be singing to take his mind off what's just happened — the tragedy, or is it disgrace that probably marks the end of his life in the service. The accident — his platoon. How many men has he lost, and how can a man facing court martial ever hope to love the general's daughter?

Putting one boot in front of the other, he goes along as if understanding is a place you can get to on foot, and as he goes, the song just keeps unfurling. "My mother m-m-m..."

If anybody asked what he was singing he would look up, surprised; *who, me?*

But he sings, "...m-m-m-m-murdered me..."

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The road gets stickier. Heat mirages shimmer in the middle distance and rise up in front of him, thick and troublesome as cream of nothing soup.

Fuddled by the dense air, the Marine bows his head against the heat and goes into the dim rural drugstore. He is not aware he's being followed.

"What's that you're singing?"

The Marine blinks. "Say what?"

It is a woman's voice. "Mister, the song."

Exploding afterimages of sunlight stud the dimness, so he does not immediately see the speaker. "Ma'am?"

The voice blurs suggestively. "Sit down, Lieutenant."

He blunders against a large shape—leatherette booth, he thinks. He can still leave. "Ma'am, you don't want me to sit with you."

The woman's hand closes on his arm and pulls him down. "You don't know what I want until I tell you."

"You haven't told me your name."

It becomes clear she isn't going to. He hears the sound she makes inside her clothes as she crosses her legs; he can't stop blinking. He thinks he can smell the warm air rising from the hollow at her throat.

What he says next, he says because he can't help himself. The old threnody always bubbles up at times like this, when he thinks he's close—to what? He can't say. He just begins. "I was born of blood and reborn in violence. If you can't handle either, you don't want me sitting with you."

She leans across the table. "You haven't told me what you were singing."

"It's an old thing. I used to think it was sad, but now..." He's hurtled into a complicated thought that he can't finish. There's no way to tell her he has bigger problems now. Instead he tells the old story: born late to a childless couple, mother dead in childbirth, wicked stepmother Gerda and the inevitable murder, if it was a murder. His father was away; he was never able to get the truth from his frantic half sister: "You were sitting by the door and your head came off; what can I tell you, your *head* came off." They buried him under the linden tree, Marline and the stepmother, but he rose up, or something did, leached of memory and stark blind crazy with love; he thinks that was him flying overhead and singing, singing:

"My mother murdered me;

"My father grieved for me;

"My sister, little Marline,

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"Wept under the linden tree..."

The woman snaps, "I thought it was an almond tree."

"All depends where you're coming from," he says, blinking until her outlines emerge from the dimness — wedge-shaped face as beautifully defined as a cat's muzzle, long hair falling over long white arms and that neatly composed face veiling her intentions; he thinks she may be beautiful — too early to tell. "Whatever it is, I can't seem to get rid of the song."

"You're still singing?"

He says in some bewilderment, "It sings me."

Even in the shadows the sudden, attentive tilt of her head is apparent. "And what do you think it means?"

But he slaps both hands flat on the table. "Enough. The stepmother got crushed in a rockfall. I came back. When being home got too hard, I joined up. That's all you need to know."

"Yes," she says, perhaps too quickly. "It is."

"So if you don't mind..."

"You haven't ordered."

There is nothing on the menu that he wants. This isn't a bar, where you can order something deep enough to disappear into; it's an old-fashioned pharmacy with a soda fountain and this is high noon, not the dead of night that lets you go home with the lovely woman who found you. When he goes outside, it will still be hot and bright. "It's not my kind of place."

As he stands she rises with him; they could be executing the first movement in an elegant *pas de deux*. "It's not mine either," she says, drawing her long hands down his arms. "Let me take you someplace where it's cool."

Emerging from the air-conditioned drugstore, he is staggered by the heat. When he looks for the woman, she is several paces ahead. "Where are we going?"

Her tone is suggestive; she does not look back, but the words reach him. "Someplace you already know."

The Marine will remember the afternoon as a bizarre, agonizing progress on foot, her striding ahead with those black gauze skirts flying and him struggling along behind, heading for the next town. No cars pass them but he understands that she would not accept a ride. In the outskirts of the big town or small city, she stops at a marked bench just as the bus comes along.

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DEEP CAVERNS, the marker says. He is about to tell her he's never heard of the place when she turns on the step and pulls him on board.

So they ride out to the caverns side by side on the cracked leatherette back seat with engine fumes boiling up between their knees while the woman thinks whatever she is thinking and the singing Marine finds that even the relentless monotony of the song cannot crowd out the mishap that separated him from his platoon last night and put him on this road. He is grieving for them. "What?"

"I said, when you get there, I want you to go inside for me."

The thick fumes make his eyes water. "Ma'am?"

"I can't," she says. "You have to. Understand, you won't be sorry. In the end, I'll make you very happy."

"You...want me to go into the caverns?"

"It's cool," she says. "Believe me, you won't be sorry."

"You want me to go in and get..."

"The tinderbox. It's an old-fashioned fire-starter."

"What would you want a thing like that for?"

Her eyes glow. Something behind them begins to smoulder. "Just do what I say. Then you'll see. Get it and I'll start your fires."

"I was on my way back to the base," he says.

Her smile is touched with malicious humor. "What would you want to do a thing like that for?"

He chooses not to catch her tone. Instead he starts telling; like the song he sings, it's something he has to do because he needs to hear it. "I have to report. I have to let them know it wasn't my fault. I have to forestall the court martial. It was my platoon. I. God, the sergeant!" He stops and starts again. "We were on maneuvers near Ocracoke. He marched them into the marsh." He does not tell her that the marsh gave way underneath them and half his men are still out there somewhere, either mired to the knees or drowned in mud and confusion; he does not tell her that in another few hours he will be AWOL. "I have to report. I do."

Without even looking at him, she divines the rest. She knows what lies at his center. She is brusque, almost matter-of-fact. "Your platoon's okay. They found everyone. It's in all the papers."

His heart leaps up. "You're sure?"

How cleverly she plays him. "TV this morning. Interviews."

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"But I'm not there."

"Oh, you," she says. "They think you deserted."

Maybe I have. It's too much to contemplate. "I have to go back and explain it."

"Do this and you won't have to go back at all. You'll be rich enough to buy your way out of anything."

But when Taps sounds tonight the Marine will go back, slouching over the causeway like the returning prodigal in his muddy fatigues and the boondockers that won't stop squelching water. When he does, he will be richer. He knows that when a beautiful woman you don't know asks you to do her a favor, you do what she asks soon enough, but you never, ever let her know what you're thinking.

Right now he says, "I'll think about it."

"No time for that. We're getting off."

They are in the woods for more than an hour, during which the lieutenant's boots get heavier in a geometric progression toward eternity. The heat is intolerable. Gnats crawl into his ears and clog his nostrils; mosquitos feed on the exposed back of his neck, sliding down the sweaty surface to feed on his most vulnerable parts. By the time the woman reaches the cave mouth and gestures, he's ready to plunge in without question: anything to escape the humidity that is pressing down on him and steaming in his throat and in the space between his regulation cap and his skull.

She turns as if she's already explained this: "You understand why I can't go in there."

He shakes his head. The shadowed opening at her back lures him; he wants to throw himself down on the worn stone floor and sleep until December.

"The dogs."

He blinks sweat out of his eyes, saying politely, "Ma'am?"

She says impatiently, "I can't go in because of the dogs."

"Dogs." Does he hear anything? Smell anything different? The place is still and if there's anything living inside, there is no hint of it. "Are you sure there are dogs in there?"

She turns that neatly feline face at an angle that makes it impossible for him to read her intentions. "Don't worry. There are only three of them. They have big eyes." When she looks up again her eyes gleam. "And they have

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what you want. Watch out for the last one, though," she adds. "He can make you or break you."

"It will be dark."

She shakes her head. "It's lighted. They were going to turn this into Luray Caverns until they found out the air was toxic."

"Toxic!"

"It won't bother you," she says with such sublime assurance that he believes her. "And what you find will solve all your problems." She lays out the details.

This is how the singing Marine finds himself descending into Deep Caverns while his companion reclines like a figure carved in the rock at its mouth and waits for him to come back with the tinderbox. "My mother m-m-m..." Not his mother. Gerda. For the first time since he came back to himself after the business with the linden tree, the song sounds right. The faces of his platoon recede and he is alone, singing in the cavern.

It is as she told him. At the widest point he finds three little niches opening off the tunnel like side chapels in a subterranean place of worship, but instead of religious statuary or mummified corpses they contain bits of blackness that stalk back and forth inside like furred furies; when the animals see the Marine they lunge for him and are hurled back into their niches as if by invisible barriers. Glowering, they mount their mahogany chests like reluctant plaster saints returning to their pedestals.

He does not like the looks of the first animal. Its eyes are big enough but when he says, "Nice doggy," it stirs in a tremendous effort to please him, and scratches up a storm of pennies that lands at his feet like so much gravel. *Pick up that junk and I won't have any room in my suit for the real thing.* Thus he throws out his first set of instructions. "Nothing doing," he says, and goes on to the next. The eyes are even huger, but in its attempt to win his attention the next animal scratches up a shower of dollar bills, shredded by sharp toenails and worthless as confetti.

The third dog does nothing. Sitting on its chest of treasure it regards him with eyes bigger and more brilliant than anybody's attempts to describe them. The effect is of lemon neon.

It is like looking into the eye of the beholder.

Without knowing what he means, the Marine says, "Then you know."

Although the dog makes no sound, the singing Marine takes its meaning: *Everything.*

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Flowing like velvet, the creature jumps off the chest, fixing him with its intense yellow glare. Although the dog is kept in the little cavern by a shield he can't see, the singing Marine climbs up on the ledge and enters easily. Now that they are in the same space he knows that if it wants to, the animal can destroy him.

"I didn't want to come back from the dead, you know." He thinks about his platoon. "You know being dead is easier."

The silence is profound. The Marine stands with his arms at his sides, waiting. There is a stir as if of air masses colliding. Huge and silent, the dog surges into the space between them. Still he does not move. He does not move even when the massive brute pads the last two steps and presses its bearlike head against him. Startled by the warmth, the *weight*, the singing Marine feels everything bad rush out of him: the violent death and burial, the strange reincarnation that finds him both victim and murderer, song and singer, still in the thrall of the linden tree and the spirits that surround it. The great dog's jaws are wide; its mouth is a fiery chasm, but he doesn't shrink from it.

When you have been dead and buried, many things worry you, but nothing frightens you.

"Stay," he says, and without caring whether it attacks him, he opens the chest. On top he finds the object in question — fire-starter, she explained, an antique tinderbox, looking crude and insufficient in its bed of thousand dollar bills. Something glitters — diamonds scattered among the bills as if by some supremely casual hand. He picks up the tinderbox.

"This is what she wants," he says to the dog. The neon eyes won't let him lie; he couldn't. "I'm supposed to take the rest, but it's only money."

The lemon eyes glimmer like paired moons.

"Money isn't everything." The song is back; he can feel the leaves of the linden tree stirring overhead and one more time replays out the perpetual round of death and survival. He is afraid of repeating it into eternity. He slams the lid and looks at the dog. "Money isn't anything." He looks up, puzzled: the box. "But neither is fire."

There is a stir; blacker than shadow, even blacker because of the neon eyes, the creature nudges him again. Its great plumed tail is wagging.

"Good boy." He tries to pat its head; the dense fur is so deep that his hand won't stop sinking into it. "You keep it. But this." Studying the tinderbox,

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he turns it over in his hand. "I wonder what she wants with it."

There is seismic thunder — a growl so profound that he forgets the eyes. Then the animal becomes a fury of deep fur and warm flesh and compressed muscles. Planting its head in his chest, it pushes the singing Marine to the edge of the little niche and to his astonishment, nudges him so he falls back into the tunnel. Its growl makes the lights flicker. Without knowing how he knows to do this, the Marine slips the tinderbox deep into his fatigues, storing it in a spot nobody can reach without his express permission. Then he looks up at the great moon eyes. Unlike most animals, this one meets his stare; he feels himself disappearing into the glow. Trapped though it is behind invisible bars, the brute makes a low purr, almost like a tiger's. The tail moves like a flight of banners. He doesn't know what it's trying to tell him. Then he does; it is amazing.

Therefore when the Marine comes up from underground and the beautiful woman slips both arms around his neck and thanks him, he is wary. When he realizes she's patting the many pockets of his fatigues, he is even more wary, but he's not surprised when she says, "You didn't take any money."

He shakes his head.

"But you got the box."

"I did," he says.

"Where is it?"

He only shakes his head.

"I see." She is already fumbling in the depths of her black gauze skirt; she pulls something out of her pocket. Because they are beyond apologies or explanations she says, "Gerda didn't die in a rockfall, you killed her," and as she brings out the knife and raises it high he sees that she looks enough like the dead murderess to be her sister.

He has no choice but to kill her. Marines know how to do this without weapons. Inside, not far from the cave's mouth, there's a chasm so deep that when he pushes her in — sexy, but vindictive, *Gerda's sister,* he listens and listens and never hears her hit bottom. The singing Marine, who hears the same old song unfurling, but louder. "That should be the end of it," he says, but it isn't. He takes the box and without much minding that he's left behind the treasure in the cavern, he does what he should have done in the first place. He goes back to the base.

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It is night by the time he gets there, and instead of marching through the main gate like a good officer, he turns off the road and runs along the fence. When you've been dead and buried and come back, you are beyond going out looking for trouble. Instead, you go to earth and wait for it to find you.

He snakes under the cyclone fence at the spot his platoon found during exercises early in training. He runs like a fox through the gullies and comes to earth in the deep gulch behind the senior officers' quarters, where he lies down too tired for thought and sobs until sleep comes up from behind and takes him. One by one the houses at the top of the cliff go dark; from down here they all look alike and it will be noon before the singing Marine realizes that the general's daughter must be only a few houses away, in the back bedroom of the biggest house at the end of Officers' Row. She lies north to south in her bed while face down, the singing Marine lies north to south in the rocks and wet earth near the bottom of the gully. Although she doesn't know he exists, their breathing is synchronized. Breath for breath, she matches him.

At reveille he hears the base waking up: the military motor humming, gears meshing so smoothly that he might never be missed here, and for the first time since they buried him under the linden tree, he is profoundly lonely.

Last night he had imagined it was only a matter of hours until the MPs found him, thus relieving him of any decisions. This morning he understands this place is secure; if he wants to, he can live here forever. The idea has a certain appeal to him. When you have been dead and buried you lose your tolerance for changes.

He has not eaten. Crouched in the gulch with his knees up, the singing Marine considers his options. If he sneaks off the base his life as he knows it is over. If he lets them catch him, his life as he knows it is over. But, God, he is hungry. Still he is an officer, and he is not going to be shot while scavenging. Instead he sits with his head between his knees waiting until he gets tired of waiting. Then he pulls out the tinderbox and with a sense of inevitability, opens it.

There is a little flint stick and a surface to strike it on. He does this once. Twice. Three times, and as he strikes it the third time the earth rattles. "It's too soon!" he cries, loud enough that the general's daughter, hanging her stonewashed jeans on the back rail of her father's quarters several houses away, will lift her head. "You called?" But by that time the singing Marine

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has slammed the box and whatever has been rumbling toward him just beneath the surface of the earth shudders, receding.

Distressed and gnawed by hunger but still humming, *m-m-m-m*, he rolls over and presses himself into the ground. The sensation is not unfamiliar. In the astounding concentration peculiar to certain mystics, he withdraws to sing the song and wait for night to come again. Rousing once, he sees the sun is low and he sets his inner alarm clock for midnight. Then, schooled in resignation, he lies still, waiting.

When it's safe he sits up and strikes the tinderbox three times. This time when sparks fly, he will leave it open. Instead of fire, it brings dense, living blackness out of blackness, huge and silent, warm. The lemon neon eyes regard him.

"I knew you'd come," he says. The dog drops something in his lap and rests its great head on his lap. "And I knew you'd bring food. Money isn't anything, but you can die of hunger."

Closer than close, the dog lies next to him while he eats. It is like sitting with a furnace. When he's done eating he leans into the thick, dense fur and without having to tell it anything, he makes the dog know everything. After a moment it gets up and shakes itself until electricity flies in the darkness. Then it wheels, action following intention so fluidly that they are as one, and the gorgeous brute seems to melt into nothing.

Alone, the singing Marine stares into his empty hands and considers his options. His life as he knows it is over here. It's too late for him to explain himself; only a goddess could do it.

A goddess. It's as if the dog has heard. In seconds it's back, coming over the edge of the little cliff and descending, as silent as it is enormous. Its shape has changed — it seems bulkier, and when the Marine gets to his feet to welcome it he sees this is because there is something on its back: the impossible superimposed on the unlikely. Here is the general's daughter, pale in the shift she slept in, lying in the dog's deep fur and sleeping as heavily as if she'd never been separated from the bed she lay down on.

He tells himself he only needs her to hear him out.

He tells himself he's only doing this because he loves her.

He tells himself this is a long dream and in dreams people love and become as one without actually touching.

Murmuring, she stirs in her sleep. This is the real general's real daughter.

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This is now and in these days you don't take women unless they invite you.

He says, "I love her, but not like this."

There is that rumble, as of thunder. Growling, the dog cocks its head and before the Marine can put out his hand to stay it or to touch the dangling satiny arm of the beautiful sleeper, it turns and vanishes.

For the rest of the night and the next long day, the singing Marine considers. There is the song, that will not stop singing. There is the general's daughter, so close that he can climb out of the gulch if he wants to and try to find her. There is the disgrace that has ended his military career and brought him to all this. Is he victim or lover or deserter? He does not know. All he knows is that as soon as it gets dark he will summon the dog again.

And the dog will bring the general's daughter. Tonight she is in a faded T-shirt the color of the ocean and she looks like Undine, sleeping deep under water. His heart staggers. If he lays his head against her will she know everything?

This time he keeps her until morning. And this time, although the singing Marine doesn't know it, her father the general will note that his daughter is missing, and when he summons the dog again tomorrow night and the dog brings the general's daughter, the slashed pockets of the shirt she has worn to bed will begin to dribble sequins, laying a glittering trail to the spot where he has hidden her.

If MPs look and look and can't find the place, at least at first, he will have the dog to thank. In a brilliant flash of comprehension the animal will strip the shirt with its teeth before it descends into the gully, tossing sequins in a dozen different directions. Not its fault that a few spangled bits cling to its fur as it sets its great haunches and slides to the spot where the Marine is hiding. Here they stay, brute and master and beautiful sleeping girl, who stirs and threatens to wake as the Marine shakes off whatever has been holding him back and too near dawn for anything to be realized, he moves to kiss her.

He can't know whether it's the dog or something inside himself asking: *Why don't you just take what you want?*

When you have been dead and buried you operate in a different context.

Still he tells himself she knows what she's doing; he tells himself her eyes are really open. Awake or not, she raises her arms and they fall into a long embrace made sweeter by the inevitability of interruption.

Almost at once the sun comes up and woman and dog, burden and bearer, recede so quickly that they might as well have vanished, leaving the singing

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Marine cooling in the dirt with his heart so torn by the pressure of guilt and sorrow and the excruciating pain of these near misses that he sings, too loud:

"My mother murdered me.

"My father grieved for me.

"My sister, little Marline..."

Yes he probably wants them to find him.

Which they do in the middle of the bright afternoon, sturdy, clean-shaven jarheads, earnest and spiffy in full uniform in spite of the heat, with polished boots and puttees and the inevitable white armbands, standing over him, and at attention. The hell of it is that as they march him out in the smelly fatigues and the squelching boondockers they will call him Sir and they will treat him with the courtesy appropriate to a ranking officer even though he no longer deserves it.

When night falls in the maximum security wing of the brig, the commanding general comes to see him. He posts his aides outside and comes in alone. It is a surprise to both of them. He looks surprisingly like his daughter, but much tougher. They will not exchange words, exactly. Instead the general will ask him:

"Why?"

and the singing Marine will not be able to answer.

Then the general will ask him, "How?"

and once again, he will not be able to answer. What comes out of him now is "m-m-m-m" because his heart is breaking and the song he sings will not stop singing itself. Even lost out of his mind in love, he is going to hear it. He will go to his grave hearing it.

Then he thinks perhaps when he is in the grave, he won't have to hear it anymore.

"You know what I can have done to you," the general says.

The singing Marine does know. He also knows without needing to be told that tradition says he can end all this and make it a happy ending. When he left behind the money in DEEP CAVERNS and took the tinderbox, he came out with the real treasure. If he strikes it twice and leaves it open, he will have the first two dogs here to do his bidding. If he strikes it three times and leaves it open, the finest animal, his champion, his first real *friend* will surge into the room and together they can make anything happen.

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But dogs have teeth and they will use them. No matter how fine they are, or how brilliant, necessity makes them savage, and like it or not the singing Marine is never far from the grave under the linden tree; he can see its dirt under his fingernails and smell the earth all these decades later.

Tradition tells him if the dogs kill everybody in charge the personnel on the base will beg him to become the general. He'll go to live in the general's quarters and when he goes into the girl's bedroom this time she'll be awake, and he will have her, but he is sad now, sobered by so many deaths and other losses that when he looks into himself, he discovers that he doesn't want to be that person. Crazy, but so was taking the girl and then not using her a different kind of crazy.

Perhaps because he is an officer, the MPs spared him the strip search, which means that he can feel the corner of the tinderbox digging into the soft flesh of his flank. All he has to do is take it out. But he can also hear himself. "M-m-m-m," and, "m-m-m-murdered me..."

And he understands that only when he is in the grave again will the song stop singing. "Sir," he says in a soft voice, "if I tried to attack you now, would you have to shoot me?"

Astounded, the general looks up just as he launches himself, and because Marines know how to kill in self defense the general does exactly what is expected, but because Marines know how to kill without weapons he does it completely differently. It is so swift that the lieutenant has no time for last words or even regrets; he slips away into what he discovers with such gratitude that it obscures all love, all loss, all grief and the thought of anyone who might mourn him, is silence. The song of love and death and rebirth and violence that he has heard all his life since the linden tree is ending. Ends. Has ended.

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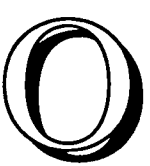
Nina Kiriki Hoffman's first solo novel, The Thread that Binds the Bones, *won the Bram Stoker Award in 1994. This fall, another Hoffman novel appears.* The Silent Strength of Stones *(Avon) is a magical tour de force that should not be missed.*

But Nina is a diverse writer who can work equally well in any genre—or no real genre, as is the case in "But Now Am Found."

But Now Am Found

By Nina Kiriki Hoffman



VERNIGHT, THE POPULATION of the city doubled. But nobody new moved in.

When Iris woke, there were two other people in her bed, and she'd gone to sleep alone. She felt hot, sweaty, crowded, and alarmed; waking with someone next to her was not something she was used to, even in the still-unfamiliar svelte shape she'd worked so hard to achieve and maintain. She still didn't believe anyone could look at her first thing in the morning and feel friendly toward her, so she usually kept people from spending the night.

The blackout curtains she used because daylight disturbed her sleep were doing their job; the only light in the room came from her digital clock's red numbers. The clock hadn't alarmed; it was only 6 A.M., and she wouldn't have to get ready for work for half an hour yet. The warmth of other bodies had wakened her. She didn't know what to be afraid of yet: procrastinating team rapists? Tired thieves lying down on the job? Or Timothy, her new boyfriend, who had a key to the apartment and had never used it? Would he

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bring a friend? In a state of suspended fear and acute discomfort, she sat up and reached across one body for the switch of the lamp on the bedside table.

Yellow light touched the pink quilt, which was humped in three places: a big hump between her and the light, her own legs, and a smaller hump on her right. There were two fuzzy heads on the pillows, one to either side of her, faces down so all she saw was messy hair the mousebrown color of her own. Her sisters? But she only had one sister, a redhead. She touched the head of the bigger lump, and it turned over and she saw her own face, sleepy and broad, fat-cheeked, smiling as it had never smiled in a mirror in all the years she had worn it. Its narrow eyes opened, glinting green at her. "Hi," said the voice of her answering machine's message. "We came home."

"What?"

The little lump stirred now, rolled over, stuck skinny arms up to stretch. It, too, wore her face, only smaller. Not younger. Herself in miniature, and gaunt, thinner than she had ever been; she had spent her childhood as a dumpling, going from cute baby to distressingly plump child.

"We came home," repeated her fat self.

"From where?'

"From wherever things go when they're lost. We found our way home." Her fat self sat up, the covers sliding down to reveal pale breasts with brown aureoles, stretch marks lacing the breasts like rivers of white lightning.

"This isn't your home," said Iris. "Get out of here! Go back where you came from."

"Don't you understand? That's why we're here." Fat Self held out arms whose undersides curved like crescents, and, cheeks dimpling, eyes squinched shut in a delighted smile, hugged Iris. "We love you," she said.

"Leave me alone!" Iris screamed. She punched at the other woman, and her fist sank into a pillowing, welcoming belly. Fat Self giggled.

The little self was tugging at Iris's nightgown with fingers thin as claws. "Give me, give me," she said in a thread of voice.

"Give you what!" Iris struggled in the grip of Fat Self, who finally released her. She turned to look at the little self and saw eyes wide and full of pain.

"More me," said Little Self. It reached out and pinched at her sit-ups-flattened stomach. "More," it whispered. "More."

Its pinching was strong. It hurt. Iris slapped its hand away. Its too-wise eyes stared at her.

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"Get out of here!" Iris yelled. She shoved at both of them. "Get away from me!"

Each one grabbed one of her wrists and held on. They were both strong. She tried to jerk away from them, but they didn't let go or even show a sign of strain. She thrashed with her legs. All she accomplished was a stirring of the covers. "Let go of me!"

"We let go of you once. We won't do it again," said Fat Self.

"Eat," said Little Self, and it and Fat Self worked together to get her out of bed and into the kitchen. Little Self tied her to a chair with clothesline, and Fat Self cooked pancakes. The kitchen smelled of sizzling butter, and flour marrying eggs and milk. Little Self got out the ice cream Iris had hidden in the tiny freezer compartment, the secret shame she couldn't resist, even though she had been dieting and exercising rigorously for five years. She still cheated some nights when the loneliness overwhelmed her. Mornings after those nights, she adjusted her exercise regimen to work off the extra calories.

Now Little Self was holding out a spoonful of chocolate chocolate mint. Iris heard her stomach growl. She opened her mouth.

Little Self fed her, gently, without spilling anything. They had just reached the bottom of the carton when Fat Self set a plate full of pancakes drowning in butter and Tim's syrup on the table in front of her, and sat down in the extra chair, which complained. Fat Self smiled and cut the pancakes into bite-sized wedges, then fed them to Iris. The pancakes were light and fluffy, and the syrup was so sweet, a taste she had been denying herself.

Iris remembered being very small. Urna, the maid, had fed her then, making the food swoop and fly before it came to rest in her mouth. "Little frog, little frog," whispered Urna, "here is your supper. Be very clever and catch it before it flies away!"

"Little frog, little frog," crooned Fat Self. And the food swirled in the air and then swooped into her mouth. She chewed, swallowed, and laughed, losing herself in the game of eating.

The alarm in the bedroom went off.

Iris tried to stand, but Little Self held the chair down. "Never mind," said Little Self, "You have other work to do today."

"Why — " Iris began, but as soon as she opened her mouth, Fat Self fed her. She turned her head away and swallowed. "Why don't you eat for yourself?" she managed to say before another mouthful of pancakes attacked.

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"We can't," said Fat Self. "That's not what we are."

"What are you?" whispered Iris.

Fat Self giggled and fed her pancakes until she couldn't eat any more.

Iris felt tired and sleepy after breakfast, so full she could hardly move. Little Self untied her, and both selves escorted her back to the bedroom, where she fell across the bed. The last thing she heard before spiraling down into deep sleep was Fat Self on the phone, telling someone she was too sick to come to work today.

When she woke, she felt bloated and ill. The clock told her it was one in the afternoon. She struggled up and opened the curtains to look out at a blast furnace day, sun baking the pale wall of the building across from hers. The street nine stories below shimmered with heat. She fell back onto the bed, her hands on her swollen stomach. She had been so careful to eat small meals, her stomach couldn't deal with big ones. Had that morning's breakfast been a dream? Rationalization for a binge? She went into the bathroom to throw up, and was on the floor, leaning over the toilet, when a hand closed over her mouth. "Not that way," said Little Self. "It has to go through you so I can get it."

"What?" Sweat beaded on Iris's forehead.

"Put it on, then work it off. That's the only way I can grow."

Her stomach churned. She vomited before Little Self could stop her, and sat back, breathing deeply, stomach acids etching her tongue and throat.

"All right," said Little Self, "I guess we're doing this wrong. You need to build back up to it a little at a time." Little Self went and got a glass of water and gave it to Iris. She rinsed out her mouth and spat into the toilet. Little Self flushed it.

When she woke later, one of them had gone shopping, and there were all her favorite foods in the house again, junk she had learned to stay away from and despise: Chee-tos and Twinkies, ice cream and devilsfood cake, potato chips and licorice whips, and all the breads — sourdough, hearth rye, raisin bread — and real dairy butter to go on top, and raspberry preserves. The whole house smelled delicious with the buttery cooking scents of childhood foods, the ones that took revenge on you for eating them by huddling under the skin, moving in like houseguests who refused to leave.

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Fat Self fixed her a salad, and she felt comforted by it; surely a salad could feed them nothing. Maybe it even canceled out some of the destruction they were practicing. She tried to hold onto that thought while they were forcing her to eat the deep-fat-fried chicken with the skin still on, crackly and spicy.

Iris closed her teeth against invasion. Fat Self stroked her cheek and murmured, "Little frog, little frog," and Iris felt her mouth open. The eating was hypnotic. She felt confusion as she ate, one part of her enjoying the experience as if she were young and being cared for, another part of her protesting every bite, screaming in horror at what this forced feeding was doing to her carefully established control, and another, more primitive part full of a hunger so deep that even this excess could not fill it.

This time when they finished feeding her she felt only a little bloated. The two selves escorted her into the living room and turned on the television. After half an hour of some inane rerun, Fat Self took Iris's arm and led her over to the Exercycle. With deep relief, Iris started cycling. Little Self adjusted the tension on the bike so that it was harder to pedal than Iris was used to, but she pushed and pumped till the sweat soaked through her nightgown and rolled down her face. Here was something she could control.

When at last she stopped, her arms and legs aching with fatigue, her seat almost as sore as it had been the first time she used the bike, Fat Self drew her into the bathroom and gave her a bath, soaping and sponging and rinsing her with strong, gentle hands. Iris was too tired to help. The warm water relaxed her. With her eyes closed, she could imagine she was a little girl again and Mother was taking care of her. She fell asleep before the bath was over.

They never let her leave the house. She didn't understand how they were handling her job. It seemed that one or the other of them must be going to work, because there was enough money for rent and groceries. Usually when Iris was awake both of them were home, but she realized, even though they had taken away the clock, that they had shifted her schedule so that she slept during the day; maybe while she slept one of her other selves answered the phones, screened the applicants, and filed all the papers generated by Charisma, Incorporated. Somebody must be doing it.

She was relieved it was no longer her.

* * *

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Little Self grew steadily bigger. Her cheeks rounded, and flesh showed on her bones. The day came when Iris woke to discover twin Fat Self cooking dinner for her — Stroganoff lush with sour cream, potatoes holding lakes of butter, salad clothed in ranch dressing, and cherry cobbler for dessert. Iris sat at the table with selves on either side. "Haven't I done enough for you now?" she asked. "Can't I get back to eating the way I want, living the way I want?"

They patted her shoulder. She took this as acquiescence and pushed her plate away, but one shook her head, making a tsk tsk tsk sound, and the other went to the drawer and got out the clothesline, showing it to her.

Iris's throat tightened. She took a gulp of wine to loosen it and dug into her dinner. Both selves beamed at her. She could no longer tell them apart.

In the morning there was a new scrawny starved self in the bed with the rest of them, and it was crying.

Overnight, the population of the city expanded. Trails of crumbs led the lost home.

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Ray Vukcevich has just completed his first novel, the name of which he will not reveal until he finishes the revisions. His stories in F&SF *have received critical acclaim and a small mountain of mail.*

When asked to comment about the stories, he wrote, "What can I say? They're short."

And good.

Count on Me

By Ray Vukcevich

IT DIDN'T CONFUSE ME that the new occupant of apartment 29A was a woman. The Father of Lies is nothing if not inventive. The number 29A is, of course, the Number of the Beast in base 16, and 16 is the atomic number of Sulfur. Base 16 is commonly called "hex." It was all too obvious.

Celia Strafford looked to be in her early thirties — 32, to be precise, since 2, 3, and 37 are the prime factors of 666, and she looked too old to be 23, and *I'm* 37, and she looked younger than me, so ergo, as they say, 32. I'm speaking of the age of her body; I couldn't know the age of the creature inside. She wore her long red hair loose down her back. I watched her closely as she stooped to pick up a box to lug up the stairs to her new apartment. She wore cut-off jeans and an abbreviated yellow halter top. Her legs were that strange golden tan you only see on women. I've never been able to figure how they achieve that color. She wore no shoes.

Her old red Chevy looked right at home among the junkers in the street. Ours is not the nicest street in Las Vegas.

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"You must be my new neighbor," I said when I met her on the stairs. "I'm Palmer Jones. I live next door. When you have time, I'll tell you 476 wonderful things about this place." My little test — 476 is the Number in base 12; there aren't really any wonderful things about this dump. I just wanted to see what she'd do with the Number.

She shifted her box and poked out a hand for me to shake — blood red nails, I noted. Cool, cool skin. Her touch made me tremble.

"I'm Celia." She gave me a deceptively nice smile, but it didn't fool me. I could see points of evil light flickering in her green eyes, I was sure of that, even if my mention of the Number hadn't gotten a rise out of her.

I already knew her name, too, having sneaked a peek at her lease agreement while ostensibly chatting with our muddleheaded manager about the deplorable conditions of my pipes. Later, I'd looked up "Strafford" in my *Oxford History of Britain,* and, sure enough, Thomas Wentworth, the first Earl of Strafford, was listed in the index. A little digging in Johnson's *A History of the English People* revealed that Strafford was executed in 1641, and 1641 is the Number of the Beast base 7. I don't believe in coincidences.

"So, what do you do, Palmer?"

I hate that question. It always catches me off guard. "I was in the Army," I muttered. I didn't mention that I am actually Brother Palmer of the Secret Order of Morse.

She turned on her perfect smile again and gave me a mock salute. "Well, there are probably 820 things worse than being in the Army," she said.

Base 9.

I felt the blood drain from my head. I could tell by the way her green eyes narrowed slightly that she'd seen my shock. I rushed a big frozen grin onto my face.

"Right," I said. "Right." I hurried on down the stairs. I'd been on my way to the corner 7-Eleven to buy a pretense for getting into her apartment later on that evening, after she'd lugged all her stuff up to 29A. I planned on spending the wait in the park we locals called "Three Trees and a Bench," across an empty lot and one street over. I had my calculator and my binoculars, and the vantage point would allow me to watch her with no danger of being seen.

I wouldn't change my plans. Even if she'd recognized me for what I am, it would be a bad idea to let her spook me into doing something rash.

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It was a fiery summer afternoon, just the day I'd most expected Celia Strafford to move in. You see, 666 expressed in base 14 is 358, and if you subtract 358 from 365 (the number of days in the year) you get 7 — that is, July, the seventh month. Then if you sum the digits of 358 in the Fadic fashion (3 + 5 + 8 = 16 (another sixteen!) and 1 + 6 = 7) you get the day. Ergo July 7. Poking out these numbers on my calculator again as I waited for her to finish moving in, I became even more convinced that she belonged to the Army of the Night, the Antichrists. I had been born to stop them. It didn't matter that I might have lost the element of surprise.

Right after I'd been asked to leave the Army, I'd spent several weeks in the public library in Fayetteville, North Carolina, picking through city street maps for the spot I knew must exist. I suspected I had found it when I saw the address of my present apartment building on the outskirts of Las Vegas. 10131 FOX Road. The number 10131 is 666 in base 5, and according to the Pythagorean system of Numerology, FOX also evaluates to 666. That might not have been enough, but when I got here, I found that apartment 29A also existed, and that clinched it. I knew it was only a matter of time before someone like Celia moved in.

Celia had a lot of stuff. All the apartments in our building are furnished, so she didn't have any really big items to move, but it took her all afternoon to unload her rented trailer and lug the boxes up to 29A. I knew that the precise number of boxes would be significant, and I tried to count them, but her red hair distracted me, and the way she moved in her short shorts, bending at the waist to pick up a box, slumping back against her car to catch her breath. Watching her I drifted into a fantasy in which I chased the demon from her body, and she, quivering with gratitude and relief, came into my arms, and we walked together from this dying neighborhood into a white picket fence family, just the two of us, multiplying, being fruitful. Wouldn't it be wonderful.

I had to slap myself on both sides of the face, hard, to dislodge that dangerous delusion. You've got to be on your toes when dealing with the damned. You can't let a demon with red hair and green eyes make a fool out of you.

I looked through my binoculars again, and seeing that she'd finished, I looked at my watch. It didn't surprise me that it was 5:56. That, after all, is 666 expressed in base 11. I gave Celia sixteen minutes to settle in, then hurried back to our building.

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"Mr. Jones. Palmer, wasn't it?" Celia said, when she answered my knock.

"House warming gift." I showed her the wine I'd bought at the 7-Eleven.

"Come in, come in. How nice." Celia closed the door behind me.

She had a cat, a scrawny orange and white thing, that circled my legs in a figure 8, all the while giving me a look that said it knew exactly what I was up to.

More precisely, the creature was a KITTEN!

Notice that 666 in base 2 is 1010011010. Those digits can be converted to Morse code by changing the ones to dashes and the zeros to dots.

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_._|..|_|_|. |_.
K  |I |T|T|E|N
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This conversion of the Number to Morse code was the original inspiration for my founding the Secret Order of Morse. In the tenth century, this insight might have eased the minds of people who worried about the Apocalypse coming at the millennium. My findings show that it could not possibly have happened until the birth of Samuel F. B. Morse and the invention of the telegraph and Morse code. Saint Morse was pretty clear in the very first words sent by telegraph: "What hath God wrought!" He was telling us to finally look out for the Big One. If people before that time had pondered the nonexistence of telegraphy, they could have rested easy — a luxury we clearly do not share today.

"Sit down, Palmer," Celia said, pulling me toward a battered, flowered couch. She took the wine from my hand, turned to the tiny kitchen, and then paused at the door to look back at me with a mischievous smile. "I'll open the wine, but I was just indulging my sweet tooth. Would you like to join me in a piece of cake?"

CAKE!

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_._.|._ |_._|.
C  |A |K |E
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"No thanks," I said, my voice a little shaky.

She returned with two filled wine glasses and the bottle, the cake

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apparently forgotten, and handed me one. She took the chair in front of me, swept her long red hair back behind one ear and sipped her wine. Deliberately showing me her forehead, I thought. No mark. Must be hidden on her body. I decided to proceed cautiously.

"What made you decide on this building?" I asked.

She just gave me a look, a knowing look, I thought, and grinned. "So, you're a military man. I'm a school teacher."

"A school teacher?"

"You want to know how much money I make."

I had the sinking feeling I was losing control of the Examination. "How much money you make?"

"People always want to know how much teachers make," she said. "I make 22,122 dollars a year."

"Base 4," I said.

She grinned an evil grin. "Teaching is a lot like hunting," she said.

"Like hunting?"

"You've got to be very very quiet when you're trying to get an idea across. You've got to sneak up on the student and shoot him in the ear with a metaphor."

"Shoot him in the ear?"

She filled our wine glasses again and put the bottle back on the floor by her chair. "Shooting," she said. "You should know about shooting, Palmer, being in the Army and all."

"I was in the Signal Corps."

"Well, even if I'm not really moved in yet." She made a face at the piles of boxes, the clutter. "I'm still taking off tomorrow to go shooting."

I gulped my wine. I knew the answer to my question, but I had to ask it anyway. Fools rush in. "What kind of gun will you use?"

"A .3030, of course."

Of course. 3030, the Number of the Beast, base 6.

"And where will you go to do this shooting?"

She put her wine glass on the floor and leaned forward, her elbows on her knees, to fix me with her flashing green eyes. "Mojave Desert. South of Death Valley. I'll be going to Essex."

To Essex!

To Essex!

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2 E 6!

Base 15.

Here was the demon, strong and calm, cool, toying with me. I might as well have been a mouse quaking before the green eyes of a serpent. A short prayer: Lord, spare me the indignity of wetting my pants. I dropped my glass and leaped to my feet. Her eyes got big, and she jumped up, too.

Every time I tried to make the Sign of the Cross at her with my fingers, my mind clouded. My first attempt looked like a T, my left first finger atop my right first finger. My second attempt looked like an upside-down L. I remembered what I wanted to do, but not how to do it. When I stopped in confusion to consider my hands, Celia collapsed giggling back into her chair.

"You bozo, Palmer," she said and made a perfect cross with her slender white fingers. A demon couldn't do that. Not a demon, which meant that she was a woman, a real woman, a woman with a goofy grin now. "Oh, sit down, Palmer," she said.

I slouched down onto the couch again.

"Maybe we'd better introduce ourselves again," she said. "I'm Sister Celia of the Divine Order of Symmetry. We study the perfect forms of the Number." She held out her hand for me to shake.

I next said what I had never said to another human being; I said, "I'm Brother Palmer of the Secret Order of Morse." It felt so good to say it aloud.

"Morse?"

There was not even a hint of mockery in her voice. I heard only genuine interest. I explained the angle I took on the Number. I used some of my favorite examples.

For example, I said, "The Number looks a lot more like a series of dots (those holes in the sixes) than it does a series of dashes, and as a series of dots it is dot dot dot or S, and S is the symbol for Sulfur, and S is the first letter of the name of you know who."

"Okay," she said.

"And consider 6 spelled out," I said and took my notepad from my shirt pocket. "Look at what that would be in Morse code." I wrote on the pad and handed it to her.

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S  I I IX
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* * *

"I see," she said.

"And with only the most obvious and elementary re-examination of the pattern of dot and dashes we get the following." I took the pad, wrote, and handed it back to her.

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....|.|_..._
H   |E|X
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"So another way to look at 666 is six six six, and another way to look at six six six is hex hex hex. Everything fits."

She agreed. We found that we agreed on a lot of things. Her kitten came and curled up in my lap. He'd waited until Celia and I had put all our cards on the table. Cats know these things.

We shared what we'd discovered about the Number.

"Look at the Number in base 3," she said. By this time she had produced two legal pads and we'd already filled and tossed yellow sheets all around the couch where we now sat shoulder to shoulder.

"The Number is, of course, 220200 in base 3," she said. "If you take out the zeros you get 222, but notice there are 3 zeros and 3 times 222 is 666."

"That's beautiful."

"Yes," she said. She sighed. "Yes, beautiful. But it doesn't really matter now."

"What do you mean?"

"How many bases has your research involved, Palmer?"

"Sixteen," I said. "There's bound to be discoveries above that, but I'll leave them to future scholars."

"Let me show you something," she said. "There are three symmetric forms of The Number in the first 16 bases. That is, three palindromes. Make a table of them, please."

I did so.

Base	The Number
4	22122
10	666
13	3C3

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"Now notice," she said, "that the forms break naturally into groups of three. Add that to your table."

Base	The Number	Groups Of Three
4	22122	22 | 1 | 22
10	666	6 | 6 | 6
13	3C3	3 | C | 3

"Next consider each member of a group as a number in its own base and convert it back to base 10."

"What?"

"For example, 22 in base 4 is two 4s and two 1s or ten, right?"

"Of course."

"So do that with each number and add it to your table."

Base	The Number	Groups Of Three	Base 10
4	22122	22 | 1 | 22	10 | 1 | 10
10	666	6 | 6 | 6	6 | 6 | 6
13	3C3	3 | C | 3	3 | 12 | 3

"Now add the columns," she whispered. What could she be getting at?

Base	The Number	Groups Of Three	Base 10
4	22122	22 | 1 | 22	10 | 1 | 10
10	666	6 | 6 | 6	6 | 6 | 6
13	3C3	3 | C | 3	+ 3 | 12 | 3
			——|——|——
			19 | 19 | 19

Each sum was nineteen.

"So, maybe you'd better look at base 19, Palmer," she said.

It was an historic moment. I looked up at her sunburst clock and saw that it was 12:32 — the true witching hour, 666 base 8.

"Look at the time, Celia," I said.

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She looked then took my hand and squeezed it. "Make the conversion to base 19, Palmer."

Okay. We'd need 19 symbols including the usual symbol for zero. I took the calculator from my shirt pocket. Nineteen squared is 361, and 666 minus 361 is 305, and 19 goes into 305 16 times with 1 left over. My result stunned me, and I checked it again. Same result. I checked it once more.

"Don't check it again, Palmer," she said. "It's right."

I wrote my result on a fresh page and handed her the legal pad. The Number in base 19? It's 1G1.

"More symmetry. What does it mean, Celia?"

"Write those 1s out as letters." She handed the pad back to me.

I wrote: ONE G ONE

"And that's the news, Palmer." She took the pad back and wrote two words under mine: ONE GONE. "That's what is built into the Number. God is gone. Dead or on a long vacation. We've been abandoned."

She sounded so despondent. She let the pad slip to the floor, then she covered her face with her hands and leaned against me. I put my arm around her shoulders.

"Maybe there's another meaning," I said.

"No," she said and pushed up and away from me. "The principles of symmetry are clear. I can show you proof." She picked up the pad again. "Consider the table again but this time let's look at the second set of three perfect forms. And this time, let's add horizontally instead of vertically." She wrote.

Base	The Number	Groups Of Three	Base 10
10	666	6 | 6 | 6	6 | 6 | 6 = 18
13	3C3	3 | C | 3	3 | 12 | 3 = 18
19	1G1	1 | G | 1	1 | 16 | 1 = 18

"Okay," I said.

"Proof. Notice 13 is the middle form. And the sums are all eighteen. What do you suppose is described in chapter 13 verse 18?"

The description of the Number, of course. I didn't need to say it. Still I had an uneasy feeling about her proof. She had not in any way taken into account the divine revelations of Samuel Morse.

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I took the pad again.

```
___|_.|:|__.| ___|_.|.
O  N E G  O   N E
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Base 19. I puzzled with it for a few moments, my heart pounding and my breath coming fast. I gasped when I saw the answer. The change was so simple. It involved only the last N and E.

"Celia," I said.

"What?"

"Celia!"

"What is it?"

"Look." I showed her my work.

```
___|_.|.|__.|___|_..
 O N E  G O  D
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Not ONE GONE. That was only the message at a superficial level. The application of the Morse technique told the true tale: ONE GOD.

"Oh, Palmer," she whispered.

"Yes!" I cried. I grabbed her hands and pulled her up and we spent a few minutes jumping up and down in religious ecstasy.

Then I kissed her.

Everything got really clear, and the truth I saw then is still true today for Celia and me here in 29A: God's in His heaven, and all's right with the world.

It all adds up.

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Dale Bailey's story "Giants in the Earth" from our August 1994 issue has been reprinted in The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, *edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling. His most recent appearance in our pages, "The Resurrection Man's Legacy" (July, 1995) turned out to be one of the most popular stories of the summer.*

While most of Dale's stories for us have been fantasy, "Resurrection Man" crossed between fantasy and science fiction. His latest story, "Sheep's Clothing," has crossed all the way over, proving that Dale is just as deft at sf as he is at every other genre he tries.

Sheep's Clothing

By Dale Bailey

I HAVE NEVER MUCH ADmired assassins. Their methods — subterfuge and unexpected violence — possess little appeal for me; in those rare situations when action is necessary, I have always favored direct confrontation. Anything less seems unethical.

Certainly I never aspired to be one.

I saw some of that kind — or so I have always imagined — in the Brazilian Conflict. The steambox, we called the place, and on a still night you could lie wakeful in the equatorial heat of the Cuiabá barracks and listen to the detonations of sniper fire bat away through the dark, humid air. And, of course, there were more than a few of the type on our side, as well. Types, I should say, for if you have devoted any thought to the matter at all — and during these last months I have thought of little else — it is evident that no two assassins are driven by precisely the same motives.

Not that there aren't broad categories.

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I can think of three. There is the madman, most common I suppose, fired by the blaze of his own obsessions. He hears the voice of God or he is anxious for the warrior's paradise. He is the crazed fan, the car bomber.

There is the killer motivated by greed. He works for the highest bidder, and takes pride in his skills. He is the mercenary, the hired gun, the hit man.

Finally, there is the man driven by the genuine belief that he is committing violence for utilitarian purposes — that his small evils are counterbalanced by a greater good. Of the three, he is most rare, most dangerous.

And of course, he always runs the risk that he is one of the other type, and simply hasn't the wisdom to see it.

"Senator Philip Hanson of North Carolina," Napolean Thrale said. He sat behind a polished mahogany desk, impressively barren, refulgent in the luminous halo of the floor-to-ceiling windows that formed the outer wall.

"What do you think of the man, Mr. Stern?"

The question took me by surprise. I'm not sure what I had expected when the creamy invitation had been hand-delivered the previous afternoon to the door of my Annapolis home, but certainly it wasn't this.

I say invitation, but it was a summons really, for what else can you call such a request from one of the most powerful men in the country? Certainly I was in no position to refuse. Every other semester or so, I teach a course at the Naval Academy in virtual remote warfare, but I do it on an adjunct basis. The rest of the time I do not work, and as a result I live with a certain austere economy, nibbling away at my small inheritance and waiting for my military pension. Economic realities, if nothing else, compelled me to attend.

Now, however, I found myself uncertain how to proceed. I glanced at the two people sitting on the couch opposite, an owlish-looking young man in silver-rimmed glasses, and a slim middle-aged woman with graying hair pulled severely away from the angular planes of her face. Neither of them spoke, so I turned to look at Thrale, to look past him.

Thrale's desk, the couch, and the chair where I sat formed an island of furniture in the center of the large high-ceilinged chamber. The windows beyond Thrale commanded a magnificent view. From my chair, I could see the immaculate grounds of the house drop abruptly to the turbulent rim of the Chesapeake Bay. A gull wheeled through the clear sky, and for a moment

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I imagined how it would feel to soar through that lofty emptiness. Free, I thought. That's how it must feel. And suddenly I wondered if the man behind the desk ever thought of birds, and if he envied them.

Napolean Thrale did not appear to envy anyone. He sat rigidly erect in a motorized wheelchair, his hands folded on the desk. His upper body was broad and heavily muscled beneath his tailored shirt. Though his legs were hidden beneath the desk, I knew that they were shrunken and useless — his badge of honor from the Brazilian Conflict. Mine is engraved upon my heart.

The owlish-looking fellow cleared his throat, but Thrale spoke first, his voice carrying the tone of quiet authority I have come to associate with men accustomed to unquestioning obedience. "Please, Dr. Truman. Give the man time." Thrale turned the terrific weight of his regard on Truman, and with the movement afternoon sunlight gleamed against his clean-shaven skull.

Truman fell silent.

Out the window, the seagull dived toward the dark water. It rose through spray, a fish clutched in its beak. I suddenly realized that my hands were shaking.

"Senator Hanson." I clenched my hands into hard fists. "Perhaps it would be most diplomatic to say that I am violently opposed to his politics."

Thrale studied me out of eyes as green and depthless as the eyes of a snake. I'd seen that unwavering gaze before — any soldier who's been in combat has. They call it the thousand yard stare. "The question is, Mr. Stern," Thrale said, "just how violently opposed are you?" He emphasized the word "violently" in a way that I didn't necessarily like.

"Why is that the question?"

Thrale re-adjusted himself in his chair with a movement suggestive of a deliberate attempt to be casual. Had he been able, I feel certain, he would have pushed his chair back and stretched out his legs. Instead he contented himself with slumping his powerful upper body and tenting his long fingers atop the desk. "My people have looked into you, Mr. Stern. You are a man rife with contradiction, did you know that?"

"So I've been told."

He nodded, almost imperceptibly, and the woman stood. I had the sense that I was at the heart of some elaborately choreographed dance. She crossed the space between us and clasped my hand with a brief masculine intensity. "Dr. Elise Pangborn," she said, and with a gesture at the couch, "Dr. Gregory Truman." The other man dipped his head. Without looking at the Bay,

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Pangborn circled the desk to stand behind Thrale. She placed her hands atop his broad shoulders with a gesture at once proprietary and maternal.

"You've quite an impressive background, Mr. Stern," she said. "Forty confirmed kills in the Mato Grosso, instructor at the U.S. Naval Academy, a leading expert in virtual remote warfare."

"And yet," said Thrale, "in your published writings an outspoken advocate of disarmament."

This was all true, yet I could not help but agree with Truman when he coughed theatrically and said, "For Christ's sake, the man knows his own resumé." He stood and crossed the room to study the giant Picasso affixed to one wall.

"But what do you want with me?" I said.

"That brings us back to Senator Hanson," Pangborn said.

"There's a proposal for a sizeable new weapons program that's been locked up in committee for some time," Thrale said. "Hanson has the swing vote on the thing and he's dithering — not out of civic responsibility, you understand, but simply because he wants a larger piece of the action."

"He's about to get it," Pangborn said. "One of the companies that stands to benefit has proposed to build a major facility in the senator's district. You see the implications, of course."

"Hanson's going to give it the green light, I suppose," I said. "So what? It's hardly the first weapons initiative, and I'm sure it won't be the last."

Thrale smiled a thin unpleasant smile. "Of course not. However, the proposed facility is not a factory, Mr. Stern. It is a laboratory designed to engineer tailored viruses amongst other things. Just like Brazil, only this time right in the middle of downtown Asheville."

Thrale's words sent an icy blade skating along my spine. No one had known about the biological agents being used along the Xingú — not until too late. It was the biggest scandal in U.S. government since Watergate; heads rolled at every level of the intelligence agencies, but that didn't stop the rot.

It didn't keep my daughter from dying.

"Not that Hanson gives two shits about the danger," said Elise Pangborn, and the profanity was shocking here in this formal room with the Bay, scrubbed and unpolluted, crashing on the rocky shore beyond the windows.

"For him it's essentially pork," Thrale said. "But accidents happen, we can both attest to that, Mr. Stern."

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"There's one other thing," Pangborn said. "Our source on the senator's staff has informed us that he intends to introduce new legislation this term." She walked around the desk and sat on the couch, fixing me with an earnest gaze. "Quarantine camps, to keep the rot from spreading. We hoped that if nothing else convinced you, that would."

"Convince me to what?" I said.

But the answer, when it came, was spoken not by Pangborn or by Thrale, but by Truman. I had almost forgotten his presence, but during the course of the conversation he had moved soundlessly across the plush carpeting to stand behind me. I could scarcely believe that he had said the words I thought I'd heard, and when I turned to stare at him, he was standing with his hands shoved in his pockets and a startled expression on his face, as if he too was amazed at the idea for the first time spoken aloud.

I could not see his eyes. The glare from the afternoon sun across the Bay made bright metallic discs of his spectacles, as if his humanity was but a sham, and probing out from the rubber mask of his disguise were the alien beacons of some terrible intelligence.

"What did you say?" I asked him.

And when he repeated the words, they came out just the same. "They want you to kill him," Truman said.

There is an image that I hold always in my mind, an image I will forever associate with my daughter's death.

Even now, of course, no one is certain what causes the rot — no more than they were certain that HIV was responsible for AIDS back in the early '80s. All that can be said for certain is that it was first diagnosed during the Brazilian Conflict, among the soldiers who served in the Mato Grosso. Its spread was random, ugly, and exponential; it continues to this day. You have undoubtedly heard the pathology of the disease described a hundred times. You probably are aware that scientists have isolated any number of pathogens and tailored viruses — most of them deriving in the biological agents released in the jungle — that might be responsible. Certainly, you know there are still no answers.

If you're interested, blood tests have confirmed that I am infected with most of the suspected agents. Nevertheless, I have yet to get sick. Some people never do.

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Others aren't so lucky.

After the war, Anna and I remained in her native Brazil. We did not return to the States until several years later, when black pustulant sores began to erupt in our five-year-old daughter's flesh.

I can never forget the stench of the hospital room where she died — a noxious odor compounded of the sterile smell of the hospital corridors and a fulsome reek of decay, like rotting peaches, inside the room itself. At the last, my eyes watered with that smell; Anna could barely bring herself to enter the room. My daughter died alone, walled away from us by the surgical masks we wore over our noses and mouths.

Afterward, I had to face the reporters.

You may remember that year: the rot beginning to make headlines, Senator Philip Hanson fighting for his political life in a North Carolina senate race. People remembered the AIDS pandemic, and Hanson turned that fear to his advantage, as politicians will. Using my daughter's illness, he transformed his election into a referendum on the tough immigration legislation he had proposed — legislation that denied even infected foreign-born citizens admission into the U.S., never mind the hypocrisy of such a policy. Lisette died in an Annapolis hospital before that proposal became law, but not before she became a *cause célèbre* during those last painful weeks.

And not before Senator Philip Hanson won his fourth six-year senate term.

After I talked to the reporters I walked down the long tiled corridors to Lisette's room, and there, despite the terrible stench and the sound of Anna weeping in the hall, I sat with her for one last time. The television was on, post-election coverage of Hanson's celebratory round on the links.

That is the image I can never forget: Hanson, smiling his rugged smile as he teed off on a North Carolina fairway hundreds of miles away, while I sat with the corpse of my daughter and held her small cold hand in mine.

AFTER TRUMAN spoke, he shook his head, turned away, and began to pace.

There was a silence in the room that I can compare only to that of the Mato Grosso following a frenzied exchange of gunfire, when all the birds and insects and jungle creatures are still. No one spoke. I could hear the discreet whisper of air-conditioning, the crash of waves along the shore.

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"Oh, Christ," I said.

Truman lowered himself to the couch with a sigh. Elise Pangborn leaned forward and placed her elbows on her knees, directing at me a speculative stare. Without even looking over at Thrale, I could feel the hot points of his attention.

"Can I have a minute?" I asked.

Truman sighed, but Thrale lifted his hands in assent.

I walked to a distant corner of the room and stared out at the Bay. The afternoon sun carved a scintillant path through the swells. Far out, three sailboats bobbed like toys atop the water, and the gull, diminished now to a dark speck, wheeled in the cobalt sky.

I knew something about Napolean Thrale — the basic facts most people know, I guess, for the story has passed into contemporary folklore: how he left school to enlist in the conflict over ecological policy in the Mato Grosso; how he returned a paraplegic; how he built a communications empire that rivaled Time-Warner. Thrale Enterprises owned over seventy broadcast networks, ran countless online and multimedia services, had pioneered applications of virtual reality in the entertainment industry — impressive achievements for a phys.ed. major who left College Park in his sophomore year.

Recently, however, he had entrusted the management of his holdings to the bureaucracy that accretes about such institutions. I had seen speculation that he had fallen ill or retreated into self-pity, but I didn't think either was the case.

I thought I knew what had occupied his time. He wasn't the first man who had sought to prevent violence through the use of violence, but I wasn't sure I liked the idea.

I wasn't sure I didn't like it either.

There had been a point in my life — shortly after Parris Island — when I looked to the war as a glorious adventure. I didn't know myself well then. I had never killed a man.

Without looking away from the sea, I asked, "Why me?"

I turned away from the window and walked back across the long expanse of carpet and sat in my chair. "Why not the mob or a professional assassin?" I stared right at Thrale as I spoke, right into his glazed eyes.

"There's a certain symmetry to your involvement that appeals to me," he said.

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"Perhaps you should understand our objections to the policy," Pangborn said. "It's important that you understand. This isn't a vendetta."

"Then what is it?"

"It's the policy."

Momentarily my eyes met those of Truman, round and liquescent behind their silver cages. "Murder a tool of diplomacy?"

"Save us the charade of innocence," said Napolean Thrale. "If it happens that you wish not to sully your hands through the use of such a tool, that is very well, and you may reject our offer. But save us the charade."

"I'm sorry," I said, and then, turning to face Pangborn again, "but it's important that I understand."

Pangborn pressed her thin colorless lips together for an instant. In the slow patient way you might explain something to a child, she said, "Hanson has a daughter — Amanda Hanson Brewer. Same party, same far-right agenda. She's presently serving in the North Carolina senate, but she's certain to be appointed to her father's office in the event of his death. We hope to prevent that if we can. Our goal is not merely to eliminate the senator. It is to eliminate his objectives."

"And that's where Dr. Truman comes in," Thrale said.

Truman shifted uncomfortably and cleared his throat. He would not meet my eyes. "It's really a matter of your experience in the Amazon basin. You were the best with the spiders. No one else even came close."

"Oh?"

"Have you ever been to the virtuals, Mr. Stern?"

"No."

"What do you know of the technique?"

"Not much."

"Essentially," Truman said, "it's a full sensory array that plugs you into a pre-designed cyberspace fantasy. It utilizes a more sophisticated version of the virtual reality technology that allowed you to ride the spiders in Brazil."

"That wasn't fantasy," I said.

"No, no, of course not. I'm not explaining this well, am I?" He rubbed his forehead. "The sophisticated sensory array of the virtuals, together with the use of virtual remote vehicles in the Amazon basin, suggested new avenues of research, new applications of virtual reality. What I'm trying to say — "

"What he's trying to say," said Pangborn, her voice dry, "is that we've

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pioneered a technique to inject nanomachines into the bloodstream of a human being. The machines propel themselves to pre-determined points in the nervous system — the base of the brain, visual and aural centers, other sensory centers — where they lodge and become active. At that point, a broad-band transmitter and receiver-array should allow a second individual to access the host's sensory data, and briefly supersede her neural commands."

"Not her consciousness," Truman said. "That's impossible — but her nerve paths and motor functions."

"You see the implications," Pangborn said.

For a moment I could not speak. "I'm not sure," I said, but I thought maybe I was lying.

Truman confirmed my suspicions with his next words. "What you've got is a living breathing marionette — a human being you can control just as you controlled the spiders in Brazil." He glanced nervously from Pangborn to Thrale. "Of course the applications of such technology are manifold."

Thrale said, "In two months Amanda Brewer will be visiting the senator in his D.C. home. With your help we hope to apply it to framing her for her father's murder."

"We've had some success with experimental interfaces," Pangborn said. "We feel sure we can do even more with an operator of your skill and experience."

"You'll be well compensated for the risk, Mr. Stern," said Thrale.

And that was when I realized that I had no choice in the matter, not immediately anyway. If I refused to go along with them, they would never allow me to leave the estate alive. Or there would be an accident during the limo ride home. Or something equally dramatic.

But that wasn't really the issue. They would never have approached me in the first place if they hadn't been almost certain that I would go along. And even as I listened to Thrale speak, I knew that I would. Not out of any personal antipathy for the way Hanson had used my daughter, though I would be lying to you if I told you no such antipathy existed. And not out of any sense of greed, though I knew I would be well paid. Mainly, I suppose, it was out of some sense of responsibility to all the people who had died — not just Lisette and Anna, and not just the friends I had seen killed in combat, but the thousands who had died as a result of the tailored viruses released in Brazil. All the thousands more who would die before the madness ended.

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Still, I could not quite suppress a thrill of excitement at what Thrale said next — for it meant freedom forever from the occasional class at the Naval Academy, from the house in Annapolis where I had lived since returning from Brazil.

"Two million new-American dollars." Thrale touched a button on his desk. A screen rose from a recessed panel, and numbers flitted by. "Placed in numbered Swiss accounts by electronic transfer. The first now, the second afterwards. What do you say, Mr. Stern?"

"You've just bought yourself a wolf," I said.

The next two months passed swiftly. I closed the house in Annapolis and moved to Napolean Thrale's estate, where I slept in a small suite with an ocean view. I took my meals alone, and I did not communicate with anyone but Pangborn and Truman. The only people with whom I might wish to speak were dead. It was almost a relief to spend my time working and studying.

The biggest problem with running a spider was the difficulty of translating human thought-commands into a form that could be assimilated by a host mechanism with a significantly different body shape — for instance, when you command a spider to run, that command must be translated into a sequence comprehensible to a machine with not two legs, but eight. The engineers had essentially solved this problem by side-stepping it altogether. The operator's command does not actually guide a spider; rather, it triggers an autonomous subroutine of pre-programmed movements that sends the machine scurrying in the chosen direction.

Theoretically, with a human-to-human operator/host link, such problems should not exist. In reality, other problems — every bit as complex — cropped up.

"Once the interface is established," Truman told me my first day in the lab, "it will be serviceable only for twenty minutes or so before the nanomachines are metabolized by the host system. And the transmitter is limited to about a kilometer. We'll have to be almost on top of you."

Then there was the problem of muscle-tissue strength. As a thirty-seven year old man in better-than-average physical condition, I could conceivably shred Amanda Hanson Brewer's musculature just by walking her across the room.

"In short," said Pangborn, "you must learn to walk again."

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I sat naked on an ice-cold steel table, having just undergone an uncomfortably thorough physical examination; neither doctor seemed the least perturbed by my discomfort.

Truman touched a button on his clipboard and a curtain on the far side of the long room swept back to reveal the metallic figure of a vaguely human-shaped hostmech.

Truman crossed the room to stand by the machine. "We've programmed the hostmech to simulate the musculature responses you can expect from Amanda Brewer. It's not going to be perfect — we could only learn so much even by hacking private medical files — but we've recreated it as closely as we can."

"In one respect, anyway," said Pangborn, "you're lucky."

"How's that?"

"She's in good shape. She runs two or three miles a day and works out on the machines twice a week. Good looks don't hurt a political career — her father taught her that."

"The differences between your own muscle responses and those you encounter when you take over the host system shouldn't be prohibitive," Truman said, "but they'll be big enough to be problematic. So we'd better get started."

With the help of the two doctors, I donned a skinsuit hardwired for full tactile sensation and then reclined on the table while Pangborn adjusted the helmet array containing the goggles and 3D speakers that would allow me to share Amanda Brewer's visual and auditory input. In the darkness that followed, I felt a sharp needling pressure at the base of my skull as Pangborn inserted the probes that would re-route my neural impulses to the broad-band transmitter. On the day of the assassination attempt, all of this equipment would be packed into a van parked outside Hanson's home — a calculated risk. For the practice sessions, however, we used the more expansive lab.

"Ready?" Pangborn asked.

"I guess."

"You're going to feel some brief discomfort when I give you the injection, and then you'll experience a moment of disorientation as I activate the interface."

I felt the sharp bite of a needle as Pangborn injected the neural buffer that prevented my own body from trying to execute the commands being relayed

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to the hostmech, and then a wave of dizzying vertigo, as if I had been swept into the maelstrom of a whirlpool.

There is no way to adequately describe the sensation of a virtual remote interface. I have read descriptions of after-death experiences — the ones where the victim finds himself hovering at the ceiling and staring down at his own inert body — and in some ways, I imagine, the experience is not dissimilar. Certainly there is a feeling of disembodiment and momentary disorientation that will only diminish with repeated interfaces.

However, it had been years since I had experienced the virtual interface. Not since my last battle-field sessions, just before the Rio Accord, had I experienced anything even slightly similar. When the momentary disorientation passed, the darkness flickered with ghostly telemetry; then the image cleared. With a shock of recognition, I saw my inert body strapped to the table across the room. My head and face were obscured by the bulky mass of the helmet array, and for a single panicky moment it looked as if some bizarre metallic creature were devouring me from the head down.

Pangborn stood at a nearby console, monitoring the data from the skinsuit's biofeed. Truman glanced quizzically at his clipboard. After a moment, he raised his head to meet the hostmech's gaze.

"Well, good," he said. "Let's try to move, shall we?"

I consciously cleared my mind and directed the hostmech to take a step. It lurched forward, tottered for a long uncertain instant, and collapsed to the floor with a crash.

During the next two months, I saw Napolean Thrale only twice. The house was huge, and both the lab and my suite were — with Truman's — off a single corridor in the west wing. I did not know where Pangborn slept, and I had little opportunity to find out, as I rarely entered another part of the house. I passed long days in the lab, gradually gaining proficiency in the manipulation of the hostmech's weaker musculature. Nights I spent alone in my suite, studying Thrale's extensive dossiers on Hanson and his daughter. And frequently in the cool autumn dusks, I let myself out for long runs along the beach. It was during one such excursion that I finally saw Thrale again.

I was running wind sprints along the rocky shore when I happened to glance up at the house, dark as some gothic pile against a sky tinged bloody by the westering sun. High up in the central facade, the floor-to-ceiling

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windows of Thrale's office were glaringly ablaze. Two figures were limned against the light, staring eastward toward the sea: the half-familiar shape of Elise Pangborn, and the unmistakable silhouette of Napolean Thrale, stout and indomitable even in the frame of his wheelchair.

I stood there a moment, arms akimbo, trying to catch my breath in the salt-tinged breeze. The waves broke clamorously against the rocks behind me, and far away in the darkening sky I heard a gull scream. I could not help but remember the day when this had all begun: the gull turning and turning in all that flawless blue, and the thought I'd had then. Did Thrale think of birds and did he envy them?

I suddenly wasn't so sure that he did not.

I waited an instant longer, until finally I could breathe easy again, and then I lifted my arm in some kind of greeting — a salute or an acknowledgment of the man and his pain over all the long shadowy distance between the house and the beach, between his prison and my own.

Thrale did not lift his hand in response, and a moment later the light went out, plunging the house into darkness.

ONE EVENING when I returned to my rooms following a run, I found a package waiting for me — an addition to the Brewer dossier, two readerdiscs labeled as further biographical data and a videodisc with a slip of paper affixed to one side. *Thought you might enjoy this,* the note said, and it was signed Elise Pangborn. Swabbing sweat from my forehead with a hand-towel, I plugged the unlabeled disc into a viewer and sat down to watch it.

The screen dissolved with static, cleared, and I found myself looking at a black and white image of a hotel room, obviously photographed by hidden microcam. At the bottom of the screen, the time and date of the recording glowed — eleven-thirty-seven p.m., two days previously — but I barely noticed them. I was watching the two women writhing in the bed. Their intertwined images possessed none of the self-conscious histrionics I have come to associate with professional pornography, and the uninhibited spontaneity of the participants, together with the unaccustomed thrill of voyeurism, made the whole experience simultaneously disturbing and arousing. I had watched for some time before a shift in positions revealed the dark-headed slim woman as Amanda Brewer, her heavy blonde partner as a

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trusted advisor. I wondered briefly why Pangborn had bothered to send this to me — and then I stood up and turned the thing off. I had not made love to a woman since Anna's death, and even a cold shower was not enough to drive those images from my mind.

After I had dressed, I walked across the corridor to the suite of rooms Truman occupied. He answered the door with a reader in one hand — some tech journal I imagined — and he did not seem pleased to see me. I had never been to his suite before, and his few visits to my rooms had been limited and purposeful in nature. Nonetheless, he invited me in and waved me to a chair in the sitting room.

"What can I help you with?" he asked.

"Information," I said.

"What do you want to know?"

"I've been looking over the Brewer dossier. It's...pretty thorough."

"And?" He studied the reader with one eye.

"And I was wondering how they chose me?"

Truman laughed and set the reader aside. "You're wondering if they invaded your privacy the way they've invaded hers."

"I guess."

"Rest assured, they did. They invade one's privacy with impunity."

"I was wondering, too, how you knew I would go along with this."

"Well, we didn't know, obviously."

"But you had a good idea."

"*They* had a very good idea." Truman propped his legs atop the coffee table. "Your psych profile was exhaustive and unambiguous, Stern. They know you better than you know yourself. I remember two especially pertinent remarks."

"And those are?"

"That you've perfected the art of rationalization. And that you are a very angry man."

I didn't reply. I like to think I know myself, and I was trying to reconcile Truman's description with my own self-image. Truman picked up the reader.

"Why are you involved?" I asked.

He pretended to study the reader. "I'm the brain."

"Pure research?"

"That's right, it's the glorious quest for knowledge. That's why I'm here, at the very center of the scientific universe."

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I felt a surge of almost atavistic dislike for this condescending man. I could not help myself. "Have you ever read anything about the scientists who built the bomb?"

He set the reader down to glare at me. "You're hardly in a position to second-guess me."

"I'm not in a position to second-guess anyone," I said, "but neither are you."

Though his features colored, Truman met my gaze squarely for the space of a long heartbeat. When he spoke, his voice was icily cordial. "Well, now that we've clarified that, I think you were just leaving?"

"I want to know where Pangborn stays. How come her rooms aren't on this corridor?"

"I wouldn't get too interested in Pangborn."

"But where does she stay?"

"You have to be kidding."

"No."

"Are you blind, Stern? She stays with Thrale. She sleeps with him, she eats with him, she shoots him up when he needs a fix."

"Thrale struck me as fairly independent."

"I hope you're a touch more observant when it comes to Amanda Brewer. Take a look at the man's eyes. They practically glow." Truman sneered. "There are three things that keep Napolean Thrale going. Morphine, Elise Pangborn, and the precious military discipline that allows him to pretend the first two don't exist. Anything else?"

I stood to go. "No, I think that'll do it."

And then there was the dream.

It began a week or two following that glimpse of Thrale and Pangborn as they looked out over the Bay from the office windows, several nights after I had found the unlabeled videodisc waiting in my room. It had been an especially long and frustrating day in the lab. I seemed to have hit a plateau in my work with the hostmech — I could control the thing, but only with a kind of shambling clumsiness akin to that of a wind-up soldier — and I was growing equally tired of Truman's smug condescension and Pangborn's humorless efficiency. I had been drinking — just three or four rum and cokes, nowhere near what I had been drinking in the days and weeks following

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Anna's death — but enough. Enough to get that pleasantly numb sensation in the nerves of my face, enough to derive a kind of giddy adolescent excitement from replaying the disc of Amanda Brewer and her blonde girlfriend.

It must have been around midnight when I finally snapped the viewer off and stumbled through the darkness to the bedroom, already dreading the day to follow. During the endless vigilant nights of my stay in Napolean Thrale's home I had mastered a certain technique of staring wakefully out through the bedroom windows at the moonlit surf that crashed against the broken beach beyond. It was not exactly a cure for my insomnia, but it was a relief nonetheless, for after an interval of timeless staring, it seemed as if my consciousness was drawn from my body and cast out over the restless ocean. I can recall very clearly the dark house receding around me until there was only the heaving water, moonlight coruscant along the foaming edges of the waves, and my own consciousness, wheeling free above the swells, like the lone gull I had seen my first day at Thrale's, haunting the vacant sky.

This night, however, there was no need for fantasy. I fell immediately into fathomless drunken sleep, and somewhere in the poisonous hours before dawn, sleeping turned to dream.

It began with physical sensation — the rocking jostle of an ATV as it ripped a path through the lush undergrowth of the jungle. I sat far back in the cramped vehicle with a support technician, the anemic sheen of her complexion sporadically flushed by the ruddy pulse of the emergency beacon. Through the carbonized stink of overtaxed equipment and the intermingled stenches of sweat and mold, the electric tension that preceded combat was palpable. The air rang with the cacophony of the vehicle jolting over rough terrain and the constant chatter of the driver as he relayed position markers to HQ. With a metallic screech of protesting gears, the vehicle ground to a halt.

In the sudden silence, I could hear the distant babble of the radio, the hiss of pressure valves, the surging boom of blood through my temples.

"We're here," said the tech in a somehow familiar voice, dopplered with the agonizing distortion of dream.

The emergency beacon pulsed red through the interior, and in the succeeding gloom, the driver turned to face me, his flesh waxen as that of some cave-dwelling amphibian in the green backwash of his tactical displays.

"It's time," said Napolean Thrale.

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Even as I opened my mouth to protest, servos whined, and the helmet array was lowered into place. I felt the needling lance of the probes in the flesh at the base of my skull and then the swift painful jab of the hypo as the tech injected the neural buffer.

In the moment before the tech established the interface, I listened to Napolean Thrale chant maniacally — "*Let's go, let's go, let's go* — "

— and then I was plunged into night and silence, all tactile sensation obliterated. Ghostly telemetry flickered in the darkness; with a *whoosh* of hydraulic pressure, a door hissed open in the metallic belly of the ATV.

Jungle.

In my dream, I was riding the spider, chasing the beacon of an intelligence comsat through the labyrinthine jungle. Luminescent tactical data flickered at the periphery of my vision. Antediluvian vegetation blurred by on either side. Small terrified creatures flashed through the tangled scrub. The forest reverberated with the raucous complaints of brightly plumed birds, the thrash of contused undergrowth.

How I loved the hunt.

I had always loved it.

Razored mandibles snapped the humid air as I drove the spider through the shadowy depths, emerging at last through a wall of steaming vegetation into a hotel room, dropped whole into the tangled Mato Grosso.

I stopped the spider short. Servos whirred. High resolution cameras scanned the area.

The sun penetrated the clearing in luminous shards. The jungle symphony swelled into the stillness. Two women writhed on the bed, oblivious to everything but one another.

"It's time," said the voice of Napolean Thrale.

I urged the spider forward. Whiskered steel legs clawed the moist earth, the bed-sheets. Just as the mandibles closed about their fragile bodies, one of the women turned to look at me, her features contorted in the involuntary rictus of orgasm.

She wore my daughter's face.

I screamed myself awake, sitting upright in the soured sheets, my penis like a stiffened rod against my belly.

On the eve of the assassination, I spoke with Napolean Thrale again. It

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was night, the room incandescent with light. I could see the four of us in the reflective sheen of the windows, the Bay invisible beyond a mirrored tableau executed on the template of our meeting two long months ago.

Napolean Thrale sat in his wheelchair, his hands flat against his desk. There was a preternatural stillness about him, as if he had been hewn from stone. Only his mouth moved as he directed his attention to Truman, sitting restlessly on the couch by Pangborn. "Is everything in readiness?"

"I suppose."

Thrale shifted in his chair. "Let's hope so. We have a unique window of opportunity. Brewer leaves her father's home to return to North Carolina in three days."

Pangborn glanced at her clipboard. "Our people in D.C. tell us that Brewer usually leaves the grounds to jog between five and five-fifteen a.m. She returns to breakfast with her father at six."

"There won't be anyone else in the house?" I asked.

"Servants. Hanson's wife should be sleeping. As we had expected, Brewer's husband remained in Asheville. He doesn't care for the in-laws."

"Brewer runs the same course every day." Thrale touched a button and a holographic map appeared over the desk. A thin purple line stenciled in Brewer's route; a cursor pulsed over one isolated stretch of road. "A sniper will be waiting here. The hypodermic dart will be less painful than a bee-sting. She'll brush it away. As soon as the nanomachines reach their activation points, she's all yours."

The map disappeared.

Truman stood abruptly and crossed the room with the jerky movements of an automaton. Momentarily, I met Thrale's glassy eyes over the expanse of burnished desk, and then Pangborn began to speak again.

"There are some things we should go over if Dr. Truman feels up to it," she said.

Truman turned. He had gone very pale. "For God's sake, we've gone over this. This is hardly necessary — "

"It is quite necessary," Thrale said. "We must be sure that every variable has been considered. Please join us."

Truman returned to the couch and sat down, clasping his hands between his knees.

"Let us consider the technical limitations," Thrale said.

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"He knows the technical limitations."

Pangborn sighed in exasperation. "The link will last only twenty minutes at most. It's best if you can time it just before the interface decays," she said. "That way you won't have to deal with the mess."

"After the objective has been accomplished — and make sure that it has been accomplished, Mr. Stern, it will not do to have the man survive — afterwards, you will proceed to the parking garage in Baltimore where the van will be met by a disposal team. Three cars will be waiting there. You are free to go wherever you wish. Do not return here."

"And the money?"

"It will be transferred to your Swiss account." He allowed himself a grim smile. "Is there anything else?"

No one spoke.

"Then perhaps you should get some sleep. You leave well before dawn."

There was no sleep.

Truman appeared at my door not ten minutes after the meeting. I showed him into the sitting room.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know about this."

"About what?"

"This whole thing." He snatched a floor-plan of the Hanson home from the end-table and began to turn it in his hands. "I'm having second thoughts."

I thought of that first interview, of the somehow startled expression that had passed over Truman's face when he had finally spoken the words that must have been in his mind, unspoken, for a long time — "They want you to kill him." *They*, he had said.

"It's kind of late now, don't you think?"

"I don't know. Don't you have doubts?"

"Sure, I have doubts."

"We're bound to get caught. There are too many people involved — "

"Most of whom don't know what's going on. Only the four of us know everything."

"People still talk about the Kennedy assassination, even now. They won't let it die."

"But that's not what's really bothering you, is it? Getting caught?"

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His fingers trembled as he began to tear the floor-plan into long strips." I read something about the scientists who built the bomb," he said. "After what you said."

"And?"

"Oppenheimer once wrote, *physicists have known sin*, did you know that? He wrote *physicists have known sin; and this is a knowledge which they cannot lose.*"

"I guess we've all known sin," I said.

He continued as if he hadn't heard me, his fingers separating the floor-plan into surgically precise lengths. "And Rabi — do you know Rabi? — he said that scientists had abdicated the responsibility that came with knowledge. Do you know what that means?"

He did not even look up, did not want a response. I could sense the frustration building in him the way you can sense a kettle getting ready to boil. His hands flew up in a gesture of futile anger and the strips of paper fluttered to the carpet like wounded doves.

"I know you don't like me, Stern. I haven't devoted much time in my life to making people like me. Maybe that's why I'm here — maybe that's why we're all here. But I'm not saying anything overtly romantic. I'm not saying that there are things we shouldn't delve into."

"What are you saying?"

He leaned forward. "Just that you shouldn't abdicate responsibility. You ought to take some responsibility for the way things are used."

"Maybe that's what we're doing," I said, and that image of Lisette, her cold features disfigured with suppurating lesions while Hanson waved from the links, passed unbidden through my mind. "Have you ever seen someone you love just rot away before your eyes? That's what people like Hanson did before, that's what we have to prevent."

"Is that why you're doing this? Is that really why?"

I didn't have an answer. I just sat there, looking across at him, at his distressed face. "Why are you?" I asked finally, the same question I had asked him before, when he would not or could not answer.

He hesitated. "Nowhere else to go. I was at MIT for a while. There was an incident, an instance of academic dishonesty."

"That's all?"

"I was fascinated I suppose. The technical challenge was intriguing."

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"And now you've done it."

"So it would seem." Then, at last, he met my gaze, and his eyes had the look of a hunted animal. "But maybe it's not too late."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean this whole thing is in your hands. Just yours. You can call it off any time — right up to the last moment."

I did not answer. What he had said was true and I had thought of it before and I did not know what to say.

Truman sighed and stood. He paused with his hand on the door knob. "I just wanted you to think about it," he said, and then he went out and pulled the door closed behind him.

IN THE NIGHT, as I lay restless in the silent bedroom, I heard the door into the corridor open and close gently. I heard the sound of footsteps in the hall.

Pangborn came into my bedroom. In the moonlight her body shone sinewy and lean, almost masculine in its dearth of flesh. When she kissed me her tongue was rough, the sex that followed brusque and fierce, contusive as an act of violence. Afterwards, we were silent for a long time. When at last she spoke, the dry sandpaper rasp of her voice in the gloom was almost shocking. In all the time I had known her, not once had she violated her iron reserve. Not once had she revealed a single vulnerability.

"I was in Brazil," she said now. "I saw my fiancée die."

I did not have to ask her how, for though I had not recognized it, I had seen it a hundred times when I returned her inscrutable gaze. It is astonishing to me how people live through fracturing events, how afterwards they piece together a life from the shards, how those lives are like houses built on unstable foundations, sliding irrevocably into the past.

"Do you think of them often?" Pangborn asked. "Your wife and daughter?"

I thought then of all the times I had lain awake in this very room, staring wakeful at the ceiling, wishing to commune with the dead. "Every day," I said.

She nodded, moved close against me, and sometime in the night I felt her slip away into sleep. But I did not sleep; I could not, for fear of dreaming. I lay wakeful through the night, watching the surf, relentless along the

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shattered rim of the continent, and at some point it seemed as if Pangborn and the bedroom, the house itself—everything—began to recede slowly into the blackness, and there was only the night and the restless water, and my spirit like a seabird, hunting the endless dark.

At four AM, two long hours before rush hour began, the Beltway was virtually deserted. The van's headlights sprayed diminishing cones of incandescence across the southbound lanes. Occasionally, eighteen wheelers lumbered out of the fog like the unquiet spirits of prehistoric beasts, and once an ambulance whizzed by, its revolving lights slashing bloody streaks through the darkness.

Pangborn drove, her knuckles blanched around the wheel, and I rode beside her. Truman had been waiting for us when we slipped out to the garage earlier that morning, his eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot. Now he rode in back, silent, secreted with the equipment behind the dark curtains that occluded the van's interior.

Pangborn steered the van from I-495 to a secondary highway. Yellow earth-moving machinery had been abandoned by the exit, and the van jolted over a patch of rough road, reminding me of the dream, the jolting ATV, my daughter. Then we were speeding through residential areas on the outskirts of the city. The sky began to brighten, lights to gleam in the small houses that scrolled by the windows.

"Nervous?" Pangborn asked, her voice low-pitched.

"Absolutely," I said. I thought of Lisette, dead four long years; of Anna, dead two.

Pangborn took us through a series of turns, over a concrete bridge where brown water churned sluggishly through a narrow channel, and onto a broad avenue lined with stores, shuttered behind aluminum security gates.

I thought of Pangborn, of last night, what it might have meant. "The disc," I said. "Why did you send me that disc?"

Her eyes didn't deviate from the quiet streets. "It's going to come in handy. It's going to put her away."

"But why did you send it to me?"

She spared me an annoyed glance. "It was part of the dossier, that's all."

"The note wasn't part of the dossier," I said, sipping coffee from a Styrofoam cup on the dash.

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Pangborn braked at a yellow light, signaled left, and gazed impassively into the gray morning as the light cycled through to green. "I don't know why," she said, touching the gas. The van surged through the intersection and her face took on an uncommunicative façade, the mental equivalent of the security gates protecting the stores we had passed.

Once again, I had the feeling of being at the center of some elaborately choreographed dance, each seemingly random move leading into the next series of positions. *Your psych profile was exhaustive and unambiguous,* Truman had said, and now it occurred to me to wonder what that profile might have said. That they could best approach me with simultaneous appeals — to an ethical rationale, to the poisonous anger I nursed within? That Pangborn's disc and the seduction that followed were both avenues to an unacknowledged need, some fundamental weakness at my core? That I loved the hunt?

That I missed it?

Glancing out the window, I saw that we had entered a neighborhood of tree-lined boulevards littered by drifts of fallen leaves; wide sidewalks; and large houses set well back from the streets, half-hidden beyond screens of shrubbery, beyond walls and verdigris-stained fences. Pangborn pulled the van into the shadow of a brick privacy wall, some fifty meters short of a pair of blackened iron gates, and killed the engine. Truman brushed aside the curtain to peer out between us at the breaking day.

Presently the gates swung open and Amanda Hanson Brewer emerged. She did not even glance at us as she turned away and moved down the street at a slow jog, her breath smoky in the chill air.

This is where it had brought me, that intricately choreographed dance of sorrow, grief, and need that Pangborn and Thrale and even Truman had swept me into. I had come to kill a man, I had one million new-American dollars securely stashed in a numbered foreign account, and I could not get Truman's words out of my head: *This whole thing is in your hands,* he had said. *You can call it off any time, right up to the last moment.*

The interior of the van was dark and still, lit only by the pale glow of the instruments. I lay uncomfortably flat, strapped to the narrow table, Truman and Pangborn's faces seeming to float over me, pale ovals as alien and disembodied as abandoned Halloween masks.

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The radio crackled and a voice I had never before heard and could not identify said, "Green light."

I heard the hum of machinery as the helmet descended from the shadows above, and it occurred to me suddenly that I was infinitely vulnerable, that it was possible, even likely, that I might never wake up. In the last instant before the helmet cut off my field of vision, Truman leaned forward, his eyes wild and uncertain. "Twenty minutes," he said, and I found myself hoping Amanda Brewer would be wearing a watch.

Then darkness, the faint uncomfortable sting of the neural probes, a more painful jab in my upper arm followed by the hiss of the hypo.

"Good luck," Pangborn whispered, and in the moment before all feeling departed, I felt her squeeze my hand.

Vertigo.

I fell into a void of night.

Presently, my vision cleared. I was leaning against the bole of a large tree, bark rough against my back, breath fiery in my lungs. Dry leaves drifted over my sneakers. An unusually sharp smell of perspiration tickled my nostrils. I could feel the sting of sweat in my eyes, the tight pleasant pull of taxed muscles in my thighs and buttocks. I could feel the soft weight of breasts, round and unaccustomed, and I had to stifle an urge to touch them.

Time, I thought, time.

I glanced at either arm — thin, downed with light brown hair — to see if Amanda Hanson Brewer wore a watch when she exercised. She did not.

I looked around to get my bearings. I stood on a quiet tree-bordered street about half a mile from the senator's home. I could not see the van. I could not see my body. I could see nothing but this strange street, strange trees and leaves, and lucid morning light, the whole scene tinged with slight distortion, colors subtly wrong, as if I were staring through an imperfect lens of ice.

And I was running out of time.

Telling myself to ignore the panicky syncopation of Amanda Brewer's heart, I took a halting uncertain step. Just like the hostmech, I told myself, and I took another step, almost stumbling. Then I had the rhythm of it, the old rhythm of a well-toned body — anybody's body — in accustomed exercise.

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The soft beat of feet against the sidewalk, breath coming easy now, pulse steadying down.

What could she be thinking?

But it did not matter. An old lesson from the marines came back to me, a lesson from the hunt: you must never empathize with the enemy. You must kill him without fear or emotion, because if you do not he will certainly kill you. You must believe this, even if it is not true.

I turned a corner and began the final leg of the run, in the shadow of the privacy wall. Muscles pulled and loosened easily. I had the rhythm of it now, though I drove her hard out of fear of time. She would be sore later.

It would be the least of her worries.

I kept her head lowered, her vision on the pavement a few steps ahead of me (her? us?). *She must not see the van*, Pangborn had said, and she did not, though I could sense it as I passed.

Then the gates, and then we were within.

I did not know how long I had stood beneath the tree, confused, exploring the sensations of this new body. I might have ten minutes left, I might have five.

I crossed the manicured lawn at a jog, twisted the knob on the front door, and stopped dead. The door was locked. I paused, panting, and thought back on the run. I could not remember the jingle of keys. The running shorts had no pockets. No key was strung around my neck.

I felt a rising wave of panic — *my* panic this time — surge through Amanda Brewer's body, and I forced myself to take long slow breaths.

Think.

I glanced at my feet, saw the key knotted into the laces of the left shoe, and sat abruptly on the concrete stoop. The laces were double knotted. The manicured nails got in my way. At last I freed the key. Without bothering to re-tie the laces, I stood, drove the key into its slot, twisted it, and opened the door.

Flat air-conditioned air, tinged with the lemony scent of furniture polish and the faint flowery odor of potpourri, like the smell of a funeral. There was not a speck of dust. No books lay open on tables, no glasses rimmed with ice-melt stood abandoned from the night before. Morning light lanced through windows in clinical shafts, illuminating buttery patches of furniture and hardwood floor.

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No one seemed to live there. The rooms were so perfect that velvet rope might have been strung along brass posts to keep you from entering them.

I paused a moment to recall the floor-plan of the house. The kitchen and breakfast nook should be in back along this hallway. I could hear faint sounds, the rattle of crockery. I started back, knowing there could not be much time.

The breakfast table was set for two. Croissants lay heaped in a basket in the middle of the table. I could smell bacon frying.

Hanson was not there.

A slim black woman, very pretty, entered the room, carrying a carafe of orange juice and two crystal glasses on a sterling tray. "Your father's having his coffee in the office, Mrs. Brewer," she told me.

I thought about speaking, decided not to risk it, nodded curtly, and left the room. There could not be more than five minutes remaining, probably less.

The office lay on the eastern side of the house, looking over the gardens. I spent two minutes finding it, rapped at the open door, and went in. It was like stepping from an impossibly perfect magazine layout into a real living space. My cursory survey revealed worn leather appointments; books, scuffed in their leather bindings; plaques and awards affixed to one wall; tastefully unobtrusive photographs of the senator with three Republican presidents. I could smell the rich pleasant aroma of fresh-brewed coffee, faint scents of leather and tobacco.

Senator Hanson had been standing at the picture windows, studying the well-kept lawn beyond. He had turned at my knock, and now he smiled, his steaming mug held aloft in his right hand. The morning light revealed his craggy face, still handsome after decades of circumspect intemperance. For a moment he was still, his face half-limned by golden light in a tableau as subtly magisterial as a campaign photograph.

Then he took a step forward. "Good morning," he said, placing his mug on a desk as resolutely untidy as Napolean Thrale's had been obsessively neat.

I crossed the room soundlessly to stand before the desk.

For years I had imagined this moment, and now that it had come, I experienced a sudden re-evaluation of all that I had believed, all that I had intended to do. Had I come to kill a man dangerous in his power, or a man who somehow, in my mind, had gotten tangled up with the touch of Lisette's cold

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hand, the note I had found scrawled on a sheet of paper by the bathtub where Anna had slit her wrists: *Forgive me!*

The senator was handsome and charismatic, and in the long silent interval following his words an expression of genuine concern crossed his face.

"Amanda," he asked, "are you all right?"

At that moment the interface began to decay. Amanda Brewer's fingers twitched with a movement I had not commanded. I had perhaps a moment more, and all I could think of was Truman, his eyes wild and uncertain behind the silver sheen of his spectacles.

"Dad?" said Amanda Brewer — not me — in a voice halting and fraught with panic.

The senator started around his desk, his expression veering from concern to fear. His hand struck a framed picture I had not noticed, and I saw that it was a photograph of himself, triumphant on the links, and that old rage, corrosive as acid, welled up within me.

With a swift movement I swept up his mug and dashed the steaming coffee into his face. He screamed, took a quick step backwards, and screamed again when I smashed the mug on the rim of the desk.

And then, even as the interface decayed further and dark spots began to expand across my vision, the senator stopped screaming, for I had twisted a razor-edged shard of the shattered mug into his throat.

His fingers clawed at his neck and an almost comic expression of dismay crossed his face. He staggered and collapsed explosively into the windows. I was on him in a moment, sawing at his throat with a jagged edge of glass, and then there was a bright arterial pulse, warm across my hands.

Amanda Hanson Brewer screamed.

I fell into darkness, began the swift vertiginous plunge into myself.

THERE ARE any number of reasons to prefer the Cayman Islands to Switzerland, but the principal ones are the bank privacy laws and the climate. The employees of the three-hundred-plus banks on Grand Cayman, the largest and most populous of the three islands, surpass even the Swiss in their discretion, and in the Caymans, taxes are unknown. The days are hot and clear, the tropical humidity leavened by a breeze that sweeps endlessly from the

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sapphire waters of the Caribbean. On the whole, it is a very comfortable place to hide two million new-American dollars.

From the cottage where I sit and write this, I can see the lucid waters; the surf eternal on the unsurpassed beach; far overhead, some dark bird, turning, turning.

You almost certainly know the rest of the story. You have seen the disc — leaked to the press within hours of the crime — that police officers discovered on Hanson's desk. It was in an open envelope postmarked the previous morning, but I do not believe Philip Hanson had yet seen it. In the long run, it doesn't matter. Rumor has it that prosecutors intend to introduce it as evidence in Amanda Brewer's upcoming trial, but I don't guess that really matters either. It has suppressed the inevitable conspiracy theories; it has given the investigating agencies the motive they sought.

As for me?

Six months on Grand Cayman have left me dark and trim. For a while it was women, always available when one is wealthy. For a while it was rum and Red Stripe beer.

But I cannot escape the dreams. Frequently, it is that dream of the hunt, begun so long ago in the home of Napolean Thrale — riding the spider through the Mato Grosso, the hotel room, the clearing, my daughter's face as the mandibles close about her.

Sometimes — on the good nights — there is another dream. I walk along a broken strand with the sea restless beside me. In the wind that rushes across the water there are voices. I can hear Lisette and Anna, I can hear them call to me.

In the night I sit on the beach and watch the tide break against the shore, and sometimes it seems as if all the world recedes and there is nothing but the night sky and the waters and my spirit, haunting the dark reaches between. Often, I think of Pangborn and Truman and Napolean Thrale. I think of myself, too, and at such moments I cannot help but believe that our lives are like some swift ocean current, bearing us inexorably toward the shattered continent of the past.

The ocean beckons to me.

In a matter of mere moments I will finish this document, seal it in its envelope, and dispatch it to Amanda Brewer's defense attorneys — my

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penultimate act, perhaps the only one that Napolean Thrale's psych profile could not foresee. The daughters have suffered enough.

And then I will enter the dark water and strike off toward the horizon, where I can hear the voices of Anna and Lisette, calling to me like the sirens of myth. I will have no fear, no regret. I have never much admired assassins.

"No; mine was the grey, three-piece, Italian linen."

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I have an editorial confession to make: I stole this story.

Well, I didn't steal it exactly. You see, occasionally Harlan Ellison calls me to read a story he has just finished. He wants instant feedback, which I usually give him. Not this time. When he finished reading "Pulling Hard Time," I couldn't breathe. Literally. The story had knocked the wind from me.

As soon as my breath returned, I did my editorial duty. I begged, wheedled, pleaded and so sufficiently debased myself that Harlan sent the story to F&SF *instead of the other magazine he had promised it to.*

But Harlan said we could publish the story only on the condition that I confess. And now I have. Gleefully.

Pulling Hard Time

By Harlan Ellison

IN THE MAXIMUM SECURITY VR wings of New Alcatraz, there is no light. None is needed. The prisoners are fed aerobiologically; five times a day the cells are fine-sprayed with a dispersion of microscopically calibrated nutrients, pollens, bacteria-inhibiting spores and microorganisms, cleansing agents, and depilitants. All waste products gelate, coalesce, and are sucked out of the null-gravity free fall enclosure through egress tiles in the sterile white pyrex floor. Random items of furniture — overstuffed easy chairs, end-table lamps, swatches of astroturf, *saki* cups — float relaxedly in the gentle air tides that waft through the cells.

These non-penal artifacts have been stored in the cells. For the most part, they are the property of Warden Emmanuel V. Burkis, a collector of household trinkets from the past. They have been laded in the null-g maximum security cells, where they share floating space with lifers paying their debt to society, because storage space is at a premium in the one hundred per cent automated environs of New Alcatraz. To take the job of overseeing the Rock, even at the handsome figure paid annually by the Internment Department of the United

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States government, Warden Burkis was gifted with unlimited shopping authority for his hobby — household trinkets from the past. It is a lonely and quiet place, the Rock.

The lifers who occupy these cells never object to the floating furniture. They, themselves, float. They exist in a transmundane virtual reality nexus, dreaming their special dreams, bobbing and slowly turning in the vagrant breezes that play forever through the VR wings. They are serving their lifetime sentences, hanging in null-g oblivion, growing more grossly rotund and discolored by the decade. They will bump against walls and wedge in triangular dead ends where ceiling meets vertical tile surfaces, till one night, or one day, they will expire in the middle of the special dream. And only through a death kept long at bay, to assuage the demands of Society for retribution, will their sentences be commuted. Commuted, that is, to a place (in the sentencing litany of the Universal Penal Code) "far worse than the Hell in which they have served their sentence." We are a nation in balance.

●

Charlie was out back, feeding the chickens, when he heard Robin scream. He dropped the tin bucket, spilling millet in a long swath. He ran back to the restaurant shack in a panic, tripping and falling once.

As he came through the screen door at the rear of the shack, he saw the four men tearing at Robin's clothes. They had her on her back on one of the tables, and one of the leather-clad bikers had already ripped her blouse off. Her apron hung off one ankle. Another had spread her legs, and was unzipping his roughout pants, pushing between her thighs as the shortest of the four, a little man with almost no hair on the left side of his head, cut away Robin's skirt with what looked like a fish-boning knife.

The fourth man sat at the counter, his back to Charlie, a bottle of Pepsi to his lips.

They had come in and ordered four Sunday chicken specials. Charlie had said he'd fry up the orders, but Robin had asked him to go out back and feed the chickens. Lumschbogen's Chicken & Bisquit shack. Out on Route 5. Charlie had kissed his wife, and smiled at the four amiable bikers whose Harleys and an Indian and a Moto Guzzi 750 were ranked right outside the front door, and he'd gone out back. At first, he hadn't heard her screaming above the prattling of the flock.

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The one at the counter heard Charlie come through the screen door, and swiveled on the counter stool. He had the Pepsi in his mouth. Charlie came at him fast and with the flat of his hand rammed the bottle through the biker's teeth, shoving the neck through the back of his mouth. It came out just above the nape. The man staggered to his feet, clutching his face, and fell backward into the three trying to rape Charlie's wife.

As he fell, he struck the little, half-bald one, the one who had ridden up on the 750 Ambassador. His flailing arms struck the little man, and he stumbled against the table, driving the fish-boning knife into Robin's stomach. Her scream was worse than the ones before.

Charlie grabbed up the cleaver they used to dismember the chickens for the Sunday specials, and came around the counter swinging. In Ranger basic training at Fort Benning they had discovered the hated nickname the kids had concocted on the playground when he was growing up, and they tormented him with its use. They called Charlie Lumschbogen "Charlie Lunchbucket" and he was given an Article 15 punishment for beating up two of his barracks mates.

Charlie Lunchbucket did not stop hacking and dismembering, even after the Smokeys had grabbed him. They had to cold-cock him with their riot sticks to get him to lie still.

Not even the extenuating circumstance of Robin, impaled and almost naked on a checkered tablecloth, saved him from the wrath of the law and order jury. The photographic blowups at the trial were just too grotesque. The walls of the shack had been redecorated like a pointillist canvas.

Widowed, imprisoned, lost to his own life, Charlie Lumschbogen did not do well in prison. He killed a cellmate, he crippled a guard, he assaulted a turnkey. He was reassigned without trial, in this nation in balance, to the maximum security VR wing on the Rock. Life, without possibility of parole, sharing space with other dead sticks of furniture.

●

"They don't seem particularly unhappy, Warden."

"Well, Senator, that's only because they're in virtual reality. There...that one...he just twitched, did you see that?"

"No, I'm afraid I missed it. What is he in for?"

"Ran a child pornography ring in Utah. Specialized in snuff films. Quite the monster."

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"I see he's in there with an art deco credenza."

"Yes, Maples of London. Very nice piece; I'd say about 1934. Once the Department allocates the funds for a proper estate here on the grounds, I'll be moving most of these pieces to proper sites."

"Um. Yes, of course. Well, that pretty much depends on how my report turns out, whether or not the Speaker will recognize the bill."

"Well, I'm certainly hoping you'll think I've done a good job here. It's not easy, you know. No staff, just me and the machines, and a technician or two."

"And you say every one of these men and women is suffering a worse sentence than the old style...where they sat in cells or worked on chain gangs or made license plates?"

"Absolutely, Senator. And may I say, apropos of nothing but my admiration, I think your new hairdo is infinitely more appealing than the way you wore it last time you visited. Makes you look taller."

"If you don't mind, Warden..."

"Oh, yes, sorry. Well, they just float there till they die, but it's in no way 'cruel and unusual punishment' because we do absolutely nothing to them. No corporal punishment, no denial of the basics to sustain life. We just leave them locked in their own heads, cortically tapped to relive one scene from their past, over and over."

"And how is it, again, that you do that...?"

"The technicians call it a moebius memory. Loop thalamic patterning. When they first come in we send them through cerebral indexing, drain out everything they remember, and most of what they don't; and then we codify, integrate, select the one moment from their past that most frightens or horrifies or saddens them. Then, boom, into a null-g suite, with a proleptic copula imbedded in their *gliomas*. It's all like a dream. A very very *bad* dream that goes on forever. Punishment to fit the crime."

"We are a nation in balance."

"Kindlier. Gentler. More humane. But still, in need of that large, new house, here on the grounds."

"We'll see, Warden."

●

Charlie Lunchbucket loved his mother. More than anyone. She had sat beside him night and day through the whooping cough. She made him

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cinnamon toast for breakfast. She defended him when the third grade teacher said he was incorrigible. He loved his mother.

They had been driving to Ashtabula. The truck had been hauling lumber, and as it passed them, there on the narrow back country road along the river, the back end of the flatbed had swung out, and his mother had swerved to avoid getting sideswiped.

The car had run off the road, over the berm, down the steep embankment, through the brittle woods, and plunged into the river. But only the front end had gone in. Not enough to bring water into the car. Charlie had come to, and it was dark. The roof of the car had collapsed when the trunk of the shattered tree had fallen on them. He tried to move, and could not. He called out for his mother. "Mommy," he called. But there was no answer. He could not move. Something heavy lay across him, and he was trapped in the corner of the door and the seat.

All that night he lay there, crying, calling for his mother, but she was gone. And when daylight came, he woke, thirsty and hungry and cold and frightened, and as he opened his eyes he was staring into the dead face of his mother, the steering wheel having crushed her chest. She was lying across him, pinning him. He could not move, and he could not look away. He stared into the open eyes and blackened mouth of his mother.

They found the car four days later. It had been August. It had been stifling. The windows had been rolled up. But the flies had gotten in. They had laid their eggs. And other things had come. When they found the car, Charlie Lunchbucket was out of his head. Eight years old. Worst time of his life.

●

Floating in a clean white-tiled room, dark and cool. The memory plays and replays and plays yet again, without end, without release. They get what they deserve. We are a nation of laws. We are a compassionate people. We have abolished capital punishment. No one hears, but occasionally the fat bald dying thing in the null-g suite whispers *mommy* and, once, in a year some while ago, there was a tear that dried almost immediately. We are a nation in balance.

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When John Kessel stopped doing regular book review columns for us, he promised to send us short fiction. The first story to cross my desk was "The True History of the End of the World," his collaboration with two other award-winning writers, Jonathan Lethem and James Patrick Kelly.

Jonathan Lethem, the designated spokesman for the team, gave the true history of the story's genesis thusly: "This collaboration was hatched over breakfast in a hotel restaurant on the Sunday morning of a weekend convention. Had the coffee been stronger, you might not be reading this today. Terry Bisson was at the table with us; we refer any further questions to him."

The True History of the End of the World

By Jonathan Lethem, John Kessel, and James Patrick Kelly

1.

CHESTER WANTED SOMEONE on the train to notice him, ask him if he were *the* Chester Drummond. But the other passengers paid no attention. C-K boosted, each and every one. Before they'd received the Carcopino-Koster treatments some of them had probably voted for Chester, maybe even cheered him at a rally. Now they ignored him, probably thought it was the only polite thing to do.

The bullet train rushed through the Catskills, carrying Chester into exile. It had been completed in 2017, just about the time his Valutarian Party had reached its maximum membership. He had excoriated the train then, as an example of the deranged values of government-dominated society, a costly boondoggle, a holdover of pre-millennial thinking. He had to admit that it ran well, though. He stared out of the window. Watery gray light washed over the orange and yellow forest; the successive hills were lost in the misty distance. Far to the north the dark purple sky was broken by ghostly flashes of sheet lightning. They were moving into a storm.

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He knew he should be updating his journal. For years he had kept the record of his every thought, his speculations, his analyses of his times, fully expecting his journals to become important historical documents. The problem was that he had nothing to say to posterity at the moment, wasn't even sure he believed in it. He had lost everything: his influence, his party, his job, his apartment in SoHo. He had tried living on the streets as a political statement but the civics had scooped him up and taken him to Mt. Sinai Hospital, where he had turned down C-K one last time. He could have detonated his bomb then, but he hadn't really wanted to kill anyone — except maybe himself. Now he was bound for the refusenik farm.

His dignity. That was what he had left. It had always been at the heart of his message and always would be, even if there was nobody left to inspire. He laid his head back against the seat and dozed off.

At Farron's Landing he shuffled off the train, carrying the plastic suitcase that held all his worldly possessions: journals, clothing, toothbrush, bomb.

"Mr. Drummond?" A woman with dark hair approached him. "I'm Roberta Welch. From the farm."

He shook her hand, pleased to hear his name spoken, even in the condescending C-K voice. She looked to be in her late twenties, strong and pretty — to his taste, if a little short. He could pretend she was his handpicked chauffeur, at least until they arrived.

But when he followed her around the terminal building to the lot he saw immediately that he wouldn't have a chance to pretend. The farm had sent a lumpen electric van, not a car. And Roberta Welch had another passenger, already waiting. Fine. He'd survive. It wasn't until Chester recognized the man that he felt a sharp tug at the other end of his shred of pride.

It was Brother Emil Sanger, 'Confessor To The All.' Now, thought Chester, the procession of indignities begins.

"Chester Drummond, Emil Sanger," said Roberta Welch, as though they were any two names in the world. Not the founder of the Valutarian Party and the father of one of the most eccentric cults in modern history. It began to rain.

Sanger grinned. When Chester reluctantly extended his hand, the minister took it and grasped it with both of his own. Roberta put Chester's bag in the back of the van. Chester pulled away and climbed into the middle seat. He regretted it immediately, when Sanger followed. He should have taken the

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front seat; one in the back and one in the front was importance, celebrity. Two in the back was inmates, or children.

They pulled out of the lot. "She's aquiver, Chester," said Sanger. "Such a cargo. We're too old to be attracting fillies like her, but you might as well try to stop the rain from falling." Sanger smirked. "All the great men have been great lovers; it's the price of charisma."

Roberta Welch plainly heard every word of this, but drove on without comment. Chester wanted to disassociate himself from the minister's astonishing presumption but Sanger bore on. "I take it we're here for the same purpose."

"If you mean to say we've both been reduced to the same low point, I'll agree," said Chester. "I don't take it for granted that we'll respond identically to the situation, however."

Rhetoric. Chester had to admit it felt good. However dismal a debating partner, Brother Emil Sanger might, in fact, rouse him from his funk. The Carcopino-Koster drones were no use at all. They didn't argue, but instead smiled, and murmured to one another. Like a world of psychotherapists.

"You misunderstand," said Sanger in his gravelly voice. "I assumed your calling had brought you to the same inevitable destination as my own. Something is here in this refuge that makes it a stronghold for the All." Sanger raised his big eyebrows significantly. "Best that we not speak of it now."

Chester understood that Sanger was speaking less to him than to Roberta Welch, still baiting her, with hints of secrets now, instead of affronts. Indirect address — Chester didn't begrudge him the technique.

On the other hand, he wasn't much interested in continuing to provide the occasion for its use. He turned in his seat and gazed out the window, making himself unavailable. The rain was picking up. The van followed a two-lane road that twisted up into the hills, out of Farron's Landing.

"I understand you have quite a library at the farm," said Sanger.

"We don't keep much hardcopy, actually," said Welch. "But we have a four terminal datagate and unlimited free access to the Electronic Library of Congress. All your books are available — both of you."

"Really?" said Sanger. "And which of those are accessed most often?"

God help me, thought Chester. Or should I appeal to the mercy of the All?

"Many of your books have been downloaded recently," said Welch diplomatically. "After we learned you both were coming."

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"I don't mean by the staff," said Sanger. "Which of us is read by the other residents? The non-C-K's?"

"I don't know," said Welch smoothly. "Those records are private. Perhaps neither of you is much read..."

"My work is out of print in hardcopy format," interrupted Chester. "I'm not interested in libraries anymore, and I would prefer that anything I've written be erased."

"Goodness," said Sanger. "Don't you have faith in the continued relevance of your works?"

"It's hardly a matter of faith. My writings are political tracts, not works of art. I failed to predict the Carcopino-Koster treatments, and their disastrous effect on political consciousness. But, unlike you, Mr. Sanger, I never made any claims of prescience. My work always concerns itself with the present situation. Thus my early works are out of date, though they served in their time."

"Your early works?" At least, Sanger was paying attention.

"In my current writing I denounce C-K in terms which are accessible to prisoners of the C-K mindset. They run things now; that's the political reality. I don't see much purpose in addressing myself to those like us, who have evaded treatment. After all, we're the smallest of minorities, spread over a handful of isolated farms." Chester was simply unwilling to let Sanger cast him in the role of a defeated old man, however near it was to the truth. He'd hint at a few mysteries of his own instead. Even though there was no current writing, there might be.

"Excellent!" said Sanger. "I see we are pointed in the same direction, as we are in this vehicle. When the metaphorical and the literal coincide, the presence of the All is confirmed. Let them banish us to the farm; residing there is a single answer, which by satisfying our two questions will reveal them to be one."

"Where?" asked Welch. "In the library?"

"No, Roberta, not in the library."

Chester groaned to himself. The wipers slapped a numbing rhythm as the van hummed along. They passed a hundred year old white farmhouse, a red barn, an apple orchard, rows of trees losing their leaves to the autumn downpour.

"No, Roberta," Sanger blathered on, "in this instance the literal is contradicted; libraries are behind us, as are conference calls, satellite feeds,

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federal indictments — the detritus we are sloughing off as we move to a new life on your farm."

At that moment a car rushed out of the storm going in the opposite direction, trailing a wet cloud behind it. Water spattered the windshield and for a few seconds the world was smudged and gray.

"Like a comet," said Sanger. "That's exactly the image I was seeking. We hurtle away from the past,Chester and I, sluicing off layers of an old life."

Chester couldn't resist. "But that's wrong. A comet's tail is formed by pressure from something ahead of it; it's not a trail left by rapid forward motion. It's not the result of progress but of resistance to progress."

"Splendid!" said Sanger. "Of course I'm wrong! You've defined the difference between us and the sheep that surround us, with their boosted neurotransmitters and squashed spirits. We still have the freedom to err."

"Splendid," muttered Chester. "Though I do hope, Mr. Sanger, that fallibility isn't our only remaining distinction."

"Please, Chester, you must call me Brother Emil."

The van slowed as Welch pulled up before a low, flat-roofed brick building with wide eaves. The Corley Mitchell Cooperative Accommodation Farm. She parked at the entrance and shut off the motor.

"Mr. Drummond, Brother Emil — welcome to your new home," she said, turning back across the seat to smile at them. At that moment Chester felt an odd and disconcerting impulse to touch the curve of her neck. "I hope you'll be happy here."

2.

THEIR ROOMS WERE in a wing that culminated in a bright common area furnished with a telewall, two couches, datadesks and chairs, and a refrigerator filled with whole grain snacks which, when Chester sampled them later, tasted like they had been recycled from old encyclopedias. The private rooms themselves were spare, and restful.

Chester unpacked his clothes and hung them in the small closet, unpacked his three books and put them on the shelf above his bed. *The Republic, The Wealth of Nations, The Devil's Dictionary*. For one bookend he used the brake piston of the 1974 Honda that he had kept as an ashtray

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since he was nineteen. At the other end he carefully set the bronze bust of Plato, packed with enough superdense plastique to bring down a small skyscraper. The quote engraved on its base read: "No evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death." His staff had given him the bust during the campaign of 2016; the explosives had come much later.

He'd given the major parties a run for their money in that election, taking five states and 96 electoral votes. Given the growth curve of the Valutarian Party, he knew he'd win in 2020. People had been hungry for his message. They'd suffered enough from the aftereffects of the pre-millennial irresponsibility, the dismal legacy of the late-20th century's complete abandonment of facts. Even as a young man Chester had seen the inevitable chaos that would come from the pernicious doctrine that there were no absolutes, that everything was "constructed" from language and that science was no more real than wishing. Chester believed in science.

The economic shocks of the first decade had shaken the foolishness out of the people, sent them flocking to the Valutarian Party. He had predicted his own success, seen the rising arc of his career clear as the flight of a fourth-of-July rocket: the crowds, the TV lights, the women, the successful books, his failing marriage, the electoral triumphs.

The only thing he had not forseen was the Carcopino-Koster boost.

Chester was alone in his room for a whole quarter hour before Sanger appeared in his doorway. "You must be wondering what I was alluding to in the van," Sanger said slyly.

Chester was in no mood to be polite. "I've been wondering what you were alluding to for the length of your public career," he said. "I consider every word out of your mouth to be obtuse, mystical bullshit. Metaphors for things that don't exist. I can't imagine this comes as a surprise, Brother Emil."

Sanger only smiled. "I'm offering to lift the veil in this instance, Chester."

"Go ahead."

"There's a woman here named Elizabeth Wiley. I've been seeking her for nearly two years, and with the help of the All I've found her. She's masquerading as another holdout, just like the rest of us, but she's different. She's merely the most important woman in the world."

I guess that leaves room for one of us to be the most important man, Chester thought irritably.

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"She underwent Carcopino-Koster ten years ago," continued Sanger, and suddenly Chester's attention was riveted. "A year and a half ago she was assigned to this farm, and not mistakenly. She's the Grail. A returner."

"That's impossible. C-K is irreversible."

Sanger came in and sat down on Chester's bed. "Elizabeth Wiley worked most of her life at the Missouri Botanical Gardens. Carcopino changed little in her life; she was a loving wife and mother, by all accounts contented, unremarkable. Two years ago she and her husband were on a foliage tour in New Hampshire; a tire blew and their bus skidded off the highway. Her husband was killed instantly. Elizabeth sustained massive head injuries, went into a coma. When she regained consciousness her personality had reverted to its pre-Carcopino formation."

"How do you know all of this?"

"My sources are my own. But Chester, the miracle of her reversion is not the most interesting part of Elizabeth's story. What compels me is this: when the doctors explained the situation to her, she refused another boost. She compared the two states, and declined Carcopino-Koster!"

Chester could already see five different slants for the propaganda campaign. Six, because the fact that there had been no press on this meant there had been cover-up of staggering dimensions. A laugh of pure excitement bubbled up out of him, the first in years.

"Yes!" Sanger laughed with him. "You see the true import of Sister Elizabeth; I can tell. Her potential to serve the All is limitless."

When did she become Sister Elizabeth? Chester wondered. And how could exposing government conspiracy benefit the All? Chester resented the speed with which Sanger appropriated people and ideas to his absurd cause.

"Gentlemen," said Roberta Welch. "It's time for dinner."

They looked up, startled. How long had she been standing in the doorway? How much had she heard?

3.

The refectory was a brightly lit, lemon yellow room on the south side of the building. Most of the food, Roberta Welch told them, was grown on the farm and prepared by their fellow refuseniks. Everyone stood when Welch ushered Chester and Sanger into the room. Chester was pleased that most of

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the holdouts knew who he was, although he hadn't experienced his celebrity in so long that their recognition left a melancholy aftertaste. And it galled him that they seemed much more shocked to see Sanger reduced to seeking refuge on an accommodation farm.

Many of the refuseniks were old, though in most cases gerontological advances had kept them looking fit, closer to forty than seventy. Some were legitimately younger — you could tell by the hands. Chester, engaging a politician's reflexes, memorized names and faces.

They met Nicholas Koundis, a doddering old Christian Scientist who could no longer remember how old he was or exactly who he had been. "Come to die unmuddled with, eh?" he asked them. "Good for you. Welcome aboard."

They met Gail Wood, a cheerfully dim woman who wanted to talk to them about the Red Sox. "The '18 series doesn't count," she said. "Until they win it without the help of C-K, they haven't proven anything, the curse of the Bambino is intact. I'm holding on till that day comes."

They met Allan Fence, an embittered science fiction writer who said: "I predicted this, all of it. Everything I predicted came true. But my books never sold."

They met Leon Proudline, no older than thirty, who sat huddled in a corner chanting "Fuckshitpenis, fuckshitpenis, fuckshitpenis," in a Buddhist monotone.

They met Darla Coy, who was waiting for Elvis.

They met Colin Hammel, Linda Bartly, Ebb Gonzales and John Whreg. Phil Dietrich and Joane Boyle popped out of the kitchen, wiping wet hands on white aprons. All of the refuseniks possessed belief systems that had kept them at the margins of society. Unwilling or unable to compete economically with the emotionally stabilized, intellectually enhanced C-K population, they were now exhibits in a museum of the human psyche.

If I am to resurrect my movement, Chester realized, my first followers will come from among these. No doubt Sanger was thinking the same thing, but Sanger's prospects seemed distinctly brighter. It was easier, certainly, to convert irrational believers to another form of irrational belief than to political consciousness.

"This is Dwight Greenberg," said Welch. "He's a psychology major at SUNY Binghampton who's my intern for a semester." Chester was not impressed; the C-K boost had done nothing for the college kid's complexion.

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Then, as though she'd known to save her for last, Welch steered them to a table in the corner of the dining hall, where a black woman waited alone. Elizabeth Wiley looked like someone who had suddenly shed a lot of weight. Her smooth face was hollow and the skin hung loosely from her arms. She seemed lost in the uniform greenjeans the refuseniks all wore.

"Bet," said Roberta Welch solemnly, "this is Emil Sanger and Chester Drummond." She nodded at each in turn. "Gentlemen, Bet Wiley."

Elizabeth Wiley reached out with both hands and took one of each of theirs. She had a cloudy, preoccupied expression, as if she were already carrying on two conversations at once.

"Emil and Chester are joining the farm," said Roberta Welch.

Bet Wiley peered in turn at each of the two hands she held, shifting them slightly, like prisms that might suddenly reveal a new dimension. Her touch was warm and firm.

"Oh, yes," she said, and smiled. "I recognize you now. *She* told me you were coming last week."

Chester protested, "But she didn't know. I wasn't taken off the street until Monday night."

"She doesn't mean that *I* told her," said Roberta Welch. "Bet is in communication with the Virgin Mary."

Sanger was suddenly excited. "You talk to her? This is better than I had hoped." He turned to Chester. "The Virgin Mary is one of the most frequent identifications given the All over the course of history."

But Elizabeth Wiley was shaking her head. "Oh, no. What could I say to the mother of God? No, she sends me messages in the veins of leaves. She whispers in the wind."

Sanger smoothed the conversation back to his advantage. "Yes, Sister Bet, of course," he said. "The divine always seeks new souls to touch. God loves us. I believe we're going to be dear friends."

"Oh, yes." She pulled their hands toward her. "It is here, in your fingerprints." Suddenly Chester and Sanger were touching. "You're to be great allies. The very best of friends." Too late, Chester jerked his hand away.

"What?" It was Sanger's turn to be confused. "No, I meant us. You and I, Sister."

Bet wrinkled her cheeks in a smile. "If you like."

Chester could feel Welch watching them. She must have recognized the

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danger Elizabeth Wiley posed to the boosted world. Yes, the old woman had some rough edges psychologically, but she wasn't obviously insane. He couldn't understand why she wasn't being held someplace more secure than the Corley Mitchell AccommodationFarm. Here he was, the founder of the Valutarian Party, ready and able to exploit this woman's genuine subversive potential, and so far the only person in his way was Roberta Welch. It was the neverending arrogance of C-K. Welch was less than half his age, and her intelligence, no matter how enhanced, was no match for his experience.

"Your dinner," Phil Dietrich announced, "requests that you eat it."

4.

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, as he jogged around the grounds of the accommodation farm plotting revolution, Chester came upon Roberta Welch working at a stuck pump at the fish pond. She sat crosslegged on the ground, wearing dark green coveralls. There was a line between her brows as she studied a schematic of the pump unfolded across one thigh, while in her muddy hand she held a large chrome allen wrench. Her dark hair, combed straight back in wide tracks, had come lose on one side and fell over her cheek.

He felt an unexpected mix of sympathy and disapproval. "Can't the staff handle repairs?" he asked.

Her mind was somewhere in the intricacies of the pump, and she did not look up right away. When she did she slowly smiled.

"Dwight had to go into town to buy some ready mix concrete. I like to work with my hands."

"What about your sense of dignity? Do you think your staff should see you like this?"

A misstep. She gave him a look that he had come to recognize all too well: the silent sigh of the C-K adjusted when facing an unregenerate human being. "Don't bother," Chester said. "I should have known better than to ask that."

She laughed. "Thanks. There are about four assumptions in there that I'd have to explain before I could make you understand. But there is no staff, other than Dwight and me. It's your farm; we're just here to help out."

He sat on the ground next to her. His joints were still pretty flexible for a sixty-year-old's, but then he'd been taking juvenation drugs for twenty

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years. "You know, I'm really not as unreasonable as the civics made me out to be."

She inserted the allen wrench into an aperture in the centrifugal pump and tried to turn it. It didn't budge. "I've never thought you were unreasonable. Too reasonable, if anything."

"Let me try that."

She let him take the wrench. "Something's jamming it. Don't force it too much, you could damage the mechanism."

He put his shoulders into it, and after a moment the impeller broke loose. He almost fell over with the release of resistance. She caught him; her face close to his.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

Her breath was fragrant. He felt his weight pressing against the softness of her chest and his breath caught in his throat. He gave an embarrassed cough and drew slowly away. "Nothing like a little brute strength with machinery."

"Let's try it out," she said. She reinserted the fuses into the switchbox and turned on the pump. It whined into life and water gushed out into the pool. "Thanks," she said.

"Any time."

Welch glanced over at the barn, as if looking for a way out of the conversation. Had she felt something too? "Don't forget you're scheduled for your first group therapy session today."

"I don't need therapy, Roberta. I'm a political prisoner."

"You're not a prisoner, Mr. Drummond."

"Chester."

"Therapy is optional, Chester." She packed up her tool box, professionally distant. "Not everybody takes part."

"Who does?"

"It changes from week to week. Usually Allan Fence is there, and Gail Wood, Linda Bartley. Emil Sanger said he'd come. And Bet Wiley."

She'd said the magic words. He sighed, and said: "When do we start?"

5.

Chester stood in the shower, recalling the feeling of being with a woman. It had been a long time. He wondered what Roberta Welch made of him, if she

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could tell that he was not just another lunatic. There was no point denying the electricity of her touch. When the time for action came, he hoped he would not have to hurt her.

He could not believe that there were only two of them: a woman and a boy. A small group with a weapon and the will power could take over the Corley Mitchell Accommodation Farm in a matter of minutes. Stepping out of the shower, Chester glanced at his ace in the hole: the bust of Plato, with its payload of plastique. The bomb had been his security chief's idea. Poor, desperate Korsakov had schemed to blow up Valutarian Party headquaters back in 2023 and then blame the government for trying to assassinate Chester. Korsakov had been a little crazy, even for an ex-KGB, but at least he had *believed*. Recently, even Chester's belief had flagged. On the train out to the farm, he had considered taking Plato for a walk to some nice secluded spot and blowing himself from the shadowy cave of life into the eternal world of forms. But now Bet Wiley had given him reason to live.

Unlike Korsakov, Chester was not a man of action, but he believed he could manage this little uprising. He'd need help: Fence and John Whreg seemed likely recruits, maybe he could even co-opt Brother Emil. If he couldn't win Bet Wiley over, they'd just take her hostage. All they really needed was her story, not her cooperation. Hole up in some barn with the bomb and invite the cameras to his very own media circus. He would be a colossus astride the communications net; the world would echo once again with the power of his voice.

On arriving at the lounge, he saw Brother Emil Sanger already seated at the far end of the circle of chairs. He assumed the prophet was there for the same reason he was — to get closer to Elizabeth Wiley.

Roberta opened the session by focussing immediately on the new arrivals. "Let's start with you, Brother Emil," she said. "You were saying this morning that you wanted to be cured."

"Cured, yes," said Brother Emil. "Of the coercion of the state. Of the tyranny of reason."

Roberta raised her eyebrows expectantly.

Allan Fence, the writer, quickly rose to the occasion. "What coercion?" he said. "You checked yourself in here voluntarily, Brother Emil. Of your own free will."

"When we were neanderthals," replied Brother Emil, "we developed a taste for mastodon. You know how we hunted them, my friend? We'd form

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a hunting line and drive the herd toward the edge of a cliff. Within the bounds of that line each mastodon exercised free will, yet today" — he waved at the window, which looked out over the fields — "one very rarely sees a mastodon."

"No, no, that's terribly wrong." Linda Bartly was upset. "We're not all mastodons, we're not all the same. They're like a hunting line, but what they've crowded together is a flock of creatures: sloths, butterflies, leopards, loons, platypusses — "

Loons indeed, thought Chester.

" — they want us all to be the same, but we're not — "

"Linda," said Roberta, "would you like to tell the group what you see in Brother Emil and Chester's auras?" She turned and explained to Chester: "Linda sees auras. But not around those of us who've undergone Carcopino. We've lost ours."

Brother Emil held up his hand. "It will avail us nothing to become mastodons, certainly. But if we all grew wings together, the onrushing cliff would become an opportunity."

"Or arm the mastodons with machine guns," said Allan Fence thoughtfully. "Suitably adapted for physiological differences, of course. Trunk triggered, air-cooled fifty calibers with cermet stocks."

"Mr. Drummond's aura is huge," Linda Bartly stage-whispered. "Big enough for all of us. But it's gray — "

"I'm interested in what the group thinks of Brother Emil's image of the wings," said Roberta. "Implicitly, he's proposing to lead you, to turn you into his followers. He's not a man who gives up easily — only last year he was preaching the end of the world to his cult on Mt. Shasta."

"It was postponed," said Sanger.

"Your following has evaporated since then. Is that the reason you're here?"

"I'm here because the answers are here. I always seek the answers. Others are welcome to join me in that seeking."

"It *was* postponed," said Bet Wiley. She was knitting, leaning back in her chair, unhurriedly clacking the brass needles, between which hung a tiny scrap of finished work.

There was a silence. It was more than Brother Emil shutting up and staring. Everyone seemed to hang on Bet's words.

"It was postponed," she said again, and shook her head a little. "But now

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it'll come. She has come back for the stragglers, the lost sheep."

"I'm sorry, Bet," said Roberta, "can you explain?"

Bet Wiley tilted her head. "She says I'm to be the very last. Just look at the way the chairs are arranged in this room, and you'll see it's so. Who's sitting where." Then she turned to Chester. "She tells me you're my test."

"The Virgin sent you a message about Chester Drummond?" asked Allan Fence. "You know, I wrote that story once, only it was Joan of Arc and Hitler."

"What brings you to us, Chester?" said Gail Wood, the Red Sox fan.

Chester glared at her.

"You should share with the group," said Roberta. "You agreed to cooperate."

"I did not," said Chester. "Just because I've been forced to seek shelter from your sterile C-K society doesn't mean I have to answer questions. This isn't a prison, it's an accommodation farm. Wasn't that what you said earlier?"

"You think today's society is sterile? I find it closer to utopia than the world your generation left us."

"If it were anyone else besides these condescending, all-forgiving Carcopino clones that had taken away your power," said Allan Fence, "you'd probably have been executed as a war criminal."

"Fair enough," Chester said. "At least it would have been a man's death, a leader's death."

"When you accept Carcopino-Koster treatment," said Roberta, "you'll understand how little difference there is between the leader of a movement and one of that movement's followers. We've no more to hold against you than we would against someone you'd led around by the nose — you're both victims of a delusive belief system."

"In a parade going nowhere," said Allan Fence, "it doesn't matter if you're standing in the front."

"I was a Valutarian," said Gail Wood. "I voted for you. Sent you money. 'Chester Drummond, he remembers the values of America.'"

Chester was jolted by the slogan. He had heard it through amplifiers in crowded convention halls, seen it scroll across windowshirts across the land. Now hearing it spoken here at a roundtable of idiots, Chester realized just how far he was from the ideal America.

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"Read your newsletter right up to the end," she continued reflectively. "Lifetime subscriber. Never thought I'd meet you, though."

"At the end," said Bet Wiley, "the universe shrinks to one point, and all that is scattered is collected together."

"Yes," said Brother Emil. "The All is here with us in this room." He leaned forward, excessively pleased.

"Your aura," said Linda Bartly, staring at Brother Emil. "It's flaring yellow, like a beacon of hope in the night."

"It's not night," Allan Fence pointed out. "It's one-twenty in the afternoon."

"The gray one," said Linda Bartly, indicating Chester. "He's enclosing us in his world."

"The melancholic temperament has an allure," said Roberta. "Until Carcopino, it was widely seen as a prerequisite for the deepest sort of insight. But quite the contrary is actually true."

"Tell that to Lincoln," said Chester.

"Or Beethoven, or Malzberg," said Allan Fence, with a vinegar laugh.

"The C-K society is hardly lacking for philosophers or artists," said Roberta. "You know that as well as I do. They're simply free of the psychological turbulence, the displaced intensities, that distort your intellect."

"Turbulence," said Brother Emil. "That's one word for what's missing from your utopia. Others are passion, genius, that unpredictable spark that furthers the All. Your churches are empty, your familial bonds have been reduced to economic contracts. The graveyards go unvisited because the dead are forgotten. This is a world fit only to end."

"Everything I said about the depressive tendency applies equally to the manic," said Roberta.

"Let them dance," said Bet Wiley, and again the room fell silent around her, and there was only the click of her knitting.

"Dance?" said Gail Wood finally.

"Our new friends," said Bet. "They dance like my needles here. Call it manic and depressive if you like. The Virgin knows the truth."

It seemed impossible, but it struck Chester that even Roberta treated Bet Wiley as the leader of the group.

"If it will bring the end She desires," Bet continued, "let them dance the last dance."

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6.

There were perhaps thirty hardcopy books in the farm's library room, which was across the hall from Roberta's office. But Chester was not looking for books. He used the datagate to retrieve the architect's plans for the co-operative, and downloaded them into a secure file in his journal, called "Magus."

Over the past few weeks, as he learned his way around the farm, parts of the plan had come clear. The farm kept chickens, a few cows for milk, and six vats of solarfish; all were for refusenik consumption. The cash crops grew in two hydroponic greenhouses, buried in the earth for insulation. From a distance their flat transparent krylac roofs made them look like plastic lakes. Greenhouse #1 was filled with long season crops: tomatoes, eggplant, okra, celery and melons. Greenhouse #2 supplied leafy vegetables: lettuce, chard, pak choi, kale, and cabbage. Labor-intensive fresh produce grown year-round for the restaurant and gourmet grocery trade; the Corley Mitchell Accommodation Farm actually turned a slight profit for the C-K state.

The underground utility room which housed the hydroponic recirculators and greenhouse heating system was virtually impregnable. From it he could emerge to grant interviews, with ranks of swiss chard as a reassuring backdrop.

Bet Wiley was group leader for Greenhouse #2. Chester eagerly volunteered to work there, hoping to discover some way to bend her to his purposes. Brother Emil chose her group as well, no doubt for the same reason. However, as the weeks wore on, each discovered that she was as dedicated to her *brassicas* as she was to the Mother of God. She had little time for idle chatter. When she spoke at all, it was usually to the plants. Chester tried endlessly to draw her out about the accident, C-K politics, why she had become a refusenik. She was as slippery as a melon seed. At least Brother Emil was being similarly frustrated. Often as not, the two of them ended up trying to convert one another.

Bet's volunteers spent five hours a day in the greenhouse, monitoring the nutrient solution, staking climbers, moving seedling flats, composting spent plants. Their most arduous task was hand-picking a maddening variety of pests off the plants: whiteflies and spider mites and mealy bugs and scale. The

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irony of this task was not lost on Chester. Just as he plucked offending aphids from the backs of lettuce leaves, so had the civics removed him from the alleys of Manhattan. When he shared this observation with Brother Emil that day, Bet chanced to overhear.

"But you were not removed," she said. "You were brought to where you belong. This is what She wanted." Her gesture encompassed the three of them. "You both working together. Working with me for Her."

"Mrs. Wiley," said Chester, "I wonder how much you know about the two of us, about the different nature of our respective pursuits."

Bet shook her head. "She has told me more about you than you ever could."

"But — "

"You both grew up knowing that the world you were born into must end," she said. She turned to Chester — "For you it was a somber realization," — and then to Brother Emil — "For you, ecstatic revelation. But it was the same thing. And you're both afraid you failed. She knows, so I know."

"This mirrors my current thinking exactly," said Brother Emil excitedly. "It occurred to me in group: by claiming to resolve both our agendas, the Carcopino society reveals them to be one and the same."

"I don't for a minute grant your point."

"Look at it this way," said Sanger. "Isn't all visionary political thinking, like yours, ultimately utopian? By definition?"

"Possibly."

"And isn't a utopian state one where communion between different men, and different nations, is so complete that it becomes a state of spiritual — apotheosis?"

"An ideal politics might send me groping for metaphors like 'communion,' and 'spiritual,' and 'apotheosis,' but they would still be metaphors, employed in describing a thing that would still be politics."

"Wait, listen: in a politically achieved utopia, wouldn't each individual be free from political concerns, class questions, questions of survival and economics?"

"I expect so." Chester noticed that Bet had slipped away.

"Free, therefore, to concentrate on questions of the individual's existence, development, fate — on spiritual questions?"

"If the individual in question so desired," he grumbled.

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Brother Emil grew more excited. "Listen, Chester. Isn't that precisely the deficiency you sense in the Carcopino state? They claim it as a utopia, yet the individuals are all bright surface, without depth, like energetic children! Having made the world one state under Carcopino, they should be struggling with new levels of meaning, new emancipations. Instead, they appear completely lacking in breadth, completely numbed to any sense of the great human cause, of tragic profundity, the great story."

Chester was silent.

"The only utopia is heaven," said Bet Wiley, passing by with a flat of kale seedlings. "And She says heaven is nothing more than true freedom."

At that moment they were interrupted by the appearance of a group of school children, led by Dwight. Chester stiffened; it was the first group of C-K tourists he had seen at the farm. A boy—Chester guessed he was twelve or thirteen—stepped forward, his expression bright and attentive. "Please go on with what you were saying," he said, and then smiled encouragingly at Bet, Chester and Brother Emil. "I was interested in hearing your thoughts on freedom."

As he looked at the boy's open face it came to Chester with renewed force how few they were, how large the C-K society, how formidable were the forces arrayed against his return to power. This boy probably couldn't remember a time before the boost. Chester felt swirling up out of him a despair as black as any he'd ever known.

"My thoughts on freedom are in the public record," he said to the boy, and turned and strode quickly out of the greenhouse.

7.

AFTER STALKING AROUND the grounds in a black rage for twenty minutes, he found himself at the end of the drive. The highway stretched east and west like an invitation. He wasn't a prisoner; no one was going to stop him. The worst that could happen was that some civic would pick him up, feed him supper and call the farm. But which direction should he pick? East, back to Farron's Landing and the train?

To the west, the road curved off into the trees. The air had a late-fall bite to it, a hint of the winter just around the corner. West was America's direction, the bearing of manifest destiny. It beckoned.

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The road to manifest destiny was, however, falling apart. The C-K state had over-regulated the private automobile to the point of extinction. The vast amounts of money that for the better part of a century had been expended on making and maintaining roads were being spent elsewhere.

A couple of miles down the road he came upon a farm house. White frame, at least a hundred years old. On the roof a satellite dish the size of a wok listened silently to the southern sky. In the yard was a tangle of aluminum siding that had been ripped off the house. Beside it, covered by a blue tarp, was a stack of clapboards in twenty foot lengths. Something he had overheard at the center sparked in his memory: Roberta telling Darla Coy that she was restoring an early twentieth century house.

He tried the side door and found it unlocked. A large butcher block table, scarred and darkened from years of use, dominated the kitchen. It seemed somehow barbaric. Roberta managed to live without a dishwasher, microwave or hydrator. The breakfast dishes were neatly aligned in the drying rack by the sink. One bowl, one spoon, one coffee cup.

Her office was upstairs. In one corner was her personal datagate, the latest from Cognico. There was also a flowered futon and a charmingly anachronistic metal filing cabinet. The walls were plastered with dozens of stickers for long departed pre-millennial political organizations: Amnesty International, National Rifle Association, Gays for God, The Alphysics Movement, InfoMass, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, the Moral Majority. The names stirred a cloud of associations from Chester's youth. Some of these he had belonged to; others he had fought.

She found him half an hour later standing by the filing cabinet, a folder with his name on it opened flat on top of the shelf of other folders, leafing through clippings, faxes, photographs, and half a dozen disks in plastic folders, each labeled in her small handwriting: "Journal — Early Life," "Journal — Political Career," "Journal — Relationships."

"Here you are," she said.

He didn't bother to look at her. "You broke into my journal."

"Yes." She settled herself on the futon. "It reads as if you intended it for an audience. You have some amazing insights, Chester. Your analysis of the campaign of '16 is the best I've ever read."

He considered. "You expect me to be flattered?"

"Maybe you should be." She gestured at the stickers on the walls.

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"Twentieth-century politics is a hobby of mine. I'm interested in your career, Chester."

A hobby, he thought. Like fly-fishing, stamp collecting. He closed the folder and put it back in the cabinet. "There are lots of files in here. I'm just one of your interests."

"You're a distinct individual."

"Chester Drummond. Your patient."

"Chester Drummond, hunter for secrets. Believer in truth." He could not tell how much of her voice was mockery. It didn't sound like mockery. "Leader of men. Last of the pre-millennial giants."

"And I'm fascinating, right? You're impressed by me, but then you're impressed by Emil. Bet. Allan Fence." He searched her brown eyes for some sign that she thought he was different from the rest. The light was failing and the room was heavy with shadows. She gave him nothing and he turned his back to her, feeling old, almost on the verge of tears.

He felt her hands on his shoulders. She slid them down his back, around his waist, and pressed herself against him. He could not have been more surprised had she pulled a gun on him.

He laughed, a choked laugh. She rested her head on his shoulder blade. She slid her slender fingers between the buttons of his shirt, touching the gray hair of his chest. Her hands were warm in the chill of the room. Unbelieving, he turned around.

She drew him toward the futon, and for a brief time he stopped asking himself questions, as surely as if he had C-K'd himself into equanimity, while her pale body moved through the gray dusk against his aging one.

When he awoke he found she had covered him with a quilt. It was night and a Halloween moon threw a wedge of silver light across the corner of the futon. Roberta was sitting in front of her datagate, another quilt wrapped around her body. Her dark hair tumbled over her forehead, and the profile of her face stirred unnameable emotions in him. For the first time since he'd gotten on the train in New York, he felt more calm than angry.

"What did this mean?" he asked.

"Did you enjoy it?" She did not look away from the screen.

"Of course. Didn't you?"

"Oh, yes, certainly. So why does it have to mean anything?"

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"Because we have some kind of relationship. Doctor-patient, jailer-prisoner — I don't know exactly. We work together, maybe we're even friends. This changes things."

"No, it doesn't." Finally she turned to face him. "You needed something I had to give, that's all. It's amazing how a little serotonin boost can change your outlook on life."

Chester sat up, reaching for his clothes. "You're saying this was behavior modification?"

"Don't get me wrong. You're a legitimately fascinating man, Chester. Your rebelliousness, egocentricity, radical self-confidence — they're qualities that should make you a valued member of society."

"They did, at one time," Chester said, calmer than he felt. "In case you've forgotten."

"I haven't. But there's no reason you shouldn't find a place in the world now. I heard you got upset when the latest school field trip came through this afternoon. Fine. So why shut yourself up in this museum?"

"Were you this much of a manipulative bitch before you were C-K treated?"

"I was very young. I don't remember."

Chester pulled on his pants. He had a knot in his back from the futon.

"You know, there's nothing you can do to change the world," Roberta said. She reached behind her without looking and shut off the gate. "You didn't change it as much as you thought you had, and what you did accomplish was a working out of your own inadequacies through denial and projection. You were a dangerous man, a trigger waiting to be pulled to set off the millions of similarly warped and frustrated people around you. Until they all changed, and you were left alone."

"I'm not alone here."

"Right. The others at the Mitchell center are like you. But I don't think there's enough explosive material in them for you to make much of a blast."

She rose from her chair, pulled the quilt around her and came to him. She touched his cheek. "And you don't have to be alone, you know."

Chester pushed her hand away, pulled on his shoes and left.

* * *

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8.

Chester ate dinner alone, late, sulking. For some reason he couldn't stop thinking about Charlotte, his first wife. They had been very young, both of them law students at Duke, when they'd married. They'd lived in a roach-infested apartment upstairs from a shopfront a few blocks from the campus. Charlotte was scared of insects, and when the weather turned cool the large roaches that bred outside in the leaf mold would come into the house in search of food at night. Charlotte would walk into the kitchen, flip on the light and spot one crawling up the face of the kitchen cabinet, or in the silverware drawer. She invariably screamed, but she didn't allow him to use insect spray, and she didn't want to crush them. Neither did he — though he wouldn't admit it, he was hardly less squeamish — so they kept a plastic cup and a piece of cardboard on the bookshelf. Chester would trap the roach under the cup, slide the sheet of cardboard under the cup and carry the roach to the bathroom and flush it down the toilet.

After a while, whenever he heard Charlotte's shriek from another room, he knew that it was time for him to fetch the cup and go roach hunting. The ritual, Chester later realized, in its gruesome acknowledgment of the imperfect nature of the world, and the way they coped with it without betraying their sensibilities, was a textbook example of politics at work. It bound them together.

Not so firmly, of course, that it kept them bound when the marriage went sour. A politics sufficient to the dispatching of roaches hadn't carried them very far in the end.

In a black mood, feeling all his life behind, nothing left ahead of him, Chester was drawn to Bet Wiley's room. She sat knitting, her chair turned toward the door, as though she were expecting him. There was a portrait of the Virgin hanging over the bed.

"Ah, Chester. Sit down."

He sat. Her attitude of knowing that he was going to arrive only irritated him. "Why are you always knitting? You're a little old to be expecting a baby."

"There are all kinds of babies."

He let that pass. "Do you have children?"

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"Two. My daughter Reshonda is a hospital dietician in Rochester. Roger, my son, was studying law before he was C-K boosted. Now he's a landscape architect."

"Grandchildren?"

She shook her head. The clack of her needles filled a long silence. She was waiting for something from him.

"What are you making?"

She fanned the stitches out along the needles to keep them from falling off and then held up what was obviously a sweater. "I started back in March." She came out of her chair, pressed it to his shoulders and nodded in satisfaction. "For you."

"For me?"

"She told me you would come and take over here."

"What do you mean, take over?"

"It's time for me to move on to another farm."

"Move on? I don't understand." His brain was like mud. "Were you — aware of my work?"

She shook her head. "She told me what I need to know. It has nothing to do with your previous work. That has come to an end; you must start over now. She told me you would help me complete my mission here. You and Emil."

Chester started to speak, then stopped.

"You feel very alone," said Bet.

"I — yes, I do."

"The people who seem to want to listen, the people who care; me, Emil, the others — you think we're crazy."

"I don't know."

"Soon this will be over."

"How?"

"One way or another. You will join us and know you are whole, or you will be left alone to find the martyrdom you seek. The time of hesitation is nearly done."

"I don't seek martyrdom."

"No. You seek release."

Chester lowered his head into his hands, and wet his palms with tears.

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Bet looked up, but her needles clacked on. "Emil is coming here tonight too. He needs to talk."

"I can leave."

"No. I want you to hear. But be out of sight." She nodded at the closet door. "Hurry."

He hesitated.

"Go." She waved the sweater at him. "Inside."

Amazed, Chester stumbled up and into Bet Wiley's closet. He closed the door to just a crack, and the closet light shut off automatically.

In the dark he wiped his teary cheek and leaned back against Bet's hanging clothes, and wondered how it had come to this. He might have been about to protest the indignity when there came the sound of Emil's voice.

"Sister Bet. I wonder if I might have a word with you."

"Sit down, Emil."

"I tried to find Brother Chester — "

"Better we talk alone," said Bet. "She would like us to further our understanding together. Then we can approach the others."

"Yes, fine." Chester could hear Emil's sincere excitement. "But we should draw on our collective energy soon. The group here has the potential to function as a cell, a psychic battery."

"Yes." Bet's needles ticked away, and Chester imagined he could hear her nodding.

"I imagine nothing less than that we would sequester together, barricade ourselves against the staff, against the entire Carcopino reality, and together foment the end of the world!"

"Yes, that is very much like what She has in mind for us."

"Really? She has spoken of this?"

"She sent me here to make this happen. And it is close, it is much closer than you think."

"I am beside myself, Sister Bet."

"You are. And yet there is where your work lies. You must turn to yourself, be no longer beside. For that is where the world resides. The world that must end."

"I don't understand."

"How could you? You are beside yourself. We all are. I only know because She tells me."

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"Tell me what She said about me." The certainty had gone out of Emil's voice now.

There followed a pause where even Bet's needles were silent. Chester wanted to widen the crack in the door and peek out, but he knew the closet light would flash on automatically, giving him away. Maybe if he loosened the bulb in its socket —

Bet Wiley began, bringing the words up like water from a deep, forgotten well. "The world you live in, the only world that exists for you, is the world of your reception in the souls of other people. You've lived there all your life.

"Now it has narrowed. A great forgiving, a great erasure has dwindled the world around you. Those who have taken Carcopino are deaf to your passion. In them, your world is dead. Your world is here, down to these last few who might still hear you."

"You mean the farm?" Sanger whispered.

"Join me in bringing these last sheep into the pasture, Emil. Then you'll have the end of your world. Then renewal can begin, God bless."

"My message," protested Sanger. "The All — "

"She says you lived and breathed your message into the fiber of the world. Now comes the forgiving, the forgetting. The treatment is making the world a clean slate, and the seeds you planted with your works will arise or they are not meant to. But first the job must be finished. Your world must end, just as you've always promised. You too must cross to the other side, where the C-K souls await you. There you will find your destiny. You must go to the life after your life, in the world after your world."

"Can it be?"

"You were sent to me to help me finish my work, Emil. She sent me back to gather the strays, and she sent you to help me. The others here need you."

"Incredible. And she says my works will flourish, in the future?"

"If the Carcopino world needs your message, it will find it. The same is true for Chester. The time for passionate embodiment of your works is over. Now you must move on to that bright new world yourself. But first help me bring this last tattered remnant of the old world home. You are not the only one who needs convincing, Emil. Use the power of your voice, your vision."

"But there are other farms. Other handfuls of refuseniks — "

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"She has provided. Soon, you and Chester will lead this farm to the C-K treatments, and take the treatments yourself. Then I will be moving on to another facility, where my work may continue, Her will be done."

"You're like Moses," said Emil wonderingly. "You'll lead your people to the promised land, though you may not get there yourself."

"Don't worry about me. I've had the healing once."

"You're beautiful, Sister Bet. You have the radiance of the truth. May I — may I kiss your hand?"

"It is Her work that is beautiful. You might as well kiss the leaves in the greenhouse."

"Nonetheless — "

Chester heard him kneel and smack his lips.

"I'm going to find Chester," Emil announced, his brightness recovered. "He'll be my first convert. A hard nut to crack, but if it's Her will..."

"No," said Bet. "You mustn't speak to Chester as you have been. You must not harass him. He's not a stray for you to tend, like the others. The Virgin picked him out to do her work, sooner or later; he is another leader, like you, and he will join us in our work, or find his own way. But he is not to be bothered."

"What if he doesn't see?"

"If he refuses treatment, he and I will be transferred together. Leave him to Her gentle hand. Go to the others."

"Yes, sister."

And at that, Emil hurried away.

Chester emerged from the closet. Bet was knitting, and singing soundlessly to herself. He stood before her.

Her eyes met his briefly, then fell. *Clack, clack.*

He left without saying anything.

9.

He locked the door to his room, turned slowly to face the bookshelf. Plato stared back at him impassively. He realized he had been asking all the wrong questions. It was hopeless to try to resurrect the world before C-K. That world had ended; Bet was right. The only question Chester really needed to address was this: Did he want to go on in the new world? Otherwise he ought to bring himself to an end as well. He reread the inscription on its base. "No evil can

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happen to a good man, either in life or after death." He picked the bust up for the first time since his arrival; its weight tingled down his arm. With a strangled cry, he hurled the bronze at the wall. It rang hollowly and skittered across the floor. Gone, all gone: his precious plastique, his measure of ready death. The bust was as empty as his takeover plan. Like every other refusenik on the farm, Chester had been deluding himself.

He sat on the bed and felt a moment of vast relief. It was out of his hands; he had done everything he could but the damned C-K's had outwitted him. Roberta. So this is how the world ends. He chuckled bitterly. Definitely not with a bang. What had she said? There was not enough explosive at the farm to cause much of a blast.

And then he was angry.

He found her in her office.

"Oh, that," she said. "Dwight emptied it out the first day. We have a weekly weapons scan, of course."

"Without a search warrant? What about the right to privacy?"

"You want privacy? Leave us and go back to the world. Citizens have rights," she said patiently. "You have very deliberately chosen not to be a citizen."

He was about to tell her that was un-American but she didn't give him the chance.

"What did you expect, Chester? That we didn't know how dangerous the unboosted mind can be? You think we forgot the history of the twentieth century, with all its political terrorists, religious fanatics, mass murderers? We did it for your protection, for the protection of everyone on the farm. There are people here with problems. Do you want Darla Coy making life and death decisions for you? Well, she doesn't want you making any irrevocable decisions for her either."

"And what about Bet Wiley? You're using her against us. Or is she a plant?"

"Bet Wiley is a seriously disturbed woman with her own agenda. If you asked her, she'd probably say that she was using *me*, according to some plan the Mother of God left on a piece of toast. If I knew some way to convince Bet to reboost, I would do it in a second. It is true that she has helped close several accommodation farms; she's convinced many of the stubbornest refuseniks we have to take the treatment. But whatever good she has accomplished is far

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outweighed by the pain she suffers. We do not believe in sacrifice, Chester. Everyone deserves sanity."

Chester sagged as the anger drained out of him. "And what do I deserve?"

"It's up to you, Chester. Always has been."

10.

In the common room, Emil had Gail Wood in a corner: "I had a vision, Sister Gail! It came flooding over me." He moved his hands like a hypnotist. "I was just the receiver, however; it was intended for you. I was only the channel."

'My goodness," said Gail Wood. "What — what sort of vision?"

"I was transported to an alternate universe. In it the Red Sox retained the rights to Babe Ruth. He only hit five hundred and sixty-three home runs in his career, but he pitched more, winning one hundred and thirty games. In Fenway that's not bad! And the Sox won the series in '26, '28, '32, '51, and '74! The curse of the Bambino is alleviated, Sister Gail!"

There were tears in Gail Wood's eyes. "How can — "

"I talked with the Babe, he asked about you. He wants you to know that your suffering, in this universe, helped the Sox triumph elsewhere. He's sorry — "

Gail Wood was soon to accept treatment, Chester saw. Emil was good, an efficient emissary for Bet Wiley's message. Chester felt a little stir of competitiveness; he wanted to be responsible for some conversions himself before this farm closed, before he and Emil accepted C-K treatment. He recalled again what little the two of them shared: a love of rhetoric. And a belief in conversions. How odd that they had both surrendered to the same conversion here at the farm.

Bet Wiley's message was beautiful. She'd been to the promised land and come back, and she wanted Emil and Chester and the other holdouts to have what she'd had, so badly that she was willing to delay her own return to paradise. She wanted to make sure that every last holdout was aboard before she went back herself. She could speak the language of the unconverted, convince them in a way the C-K's never could.

Ironically, it was Roberta Welch, with her typical C-K impatience and condescension, who had provided the final evidence. Bet wasn't a plant. The

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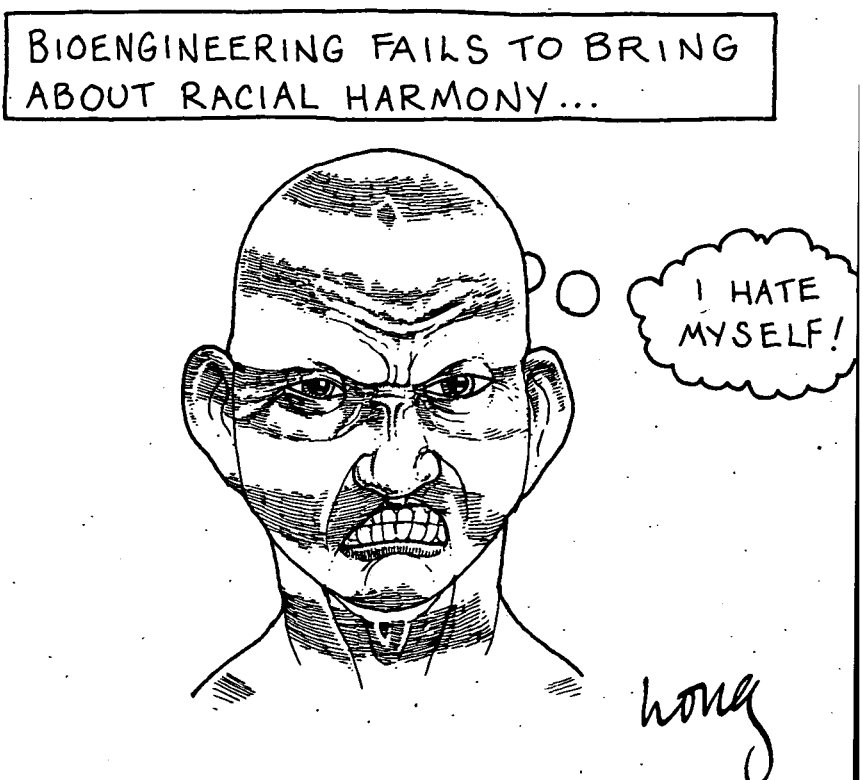
C-K's couldn't even grasp the nature of her Martyrdom. Bet was so like Emil and Chester — they three were the last to understand what it was to have a cause. Bet, however, had discerned what Emil and Chester couldn't: there was only one cause left to have.

Chester felt marvelously odd. What a thing it was, after a lifetime, to be a convert.

He wandered out of the room, rehearsing speeches in his head. Rhetoric would have one last moment of glory, would flare before it died. He decided to find Allan Fence. Fence — now there would be a challenge. Chester couldn't see him responding very well to Emil. No, he was certainly Chester's responsibility.

Nut to crack, to use Sanger's phrase.



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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

AN ODYSSEY GALACTIC

POPULARIZED science enjoys a double-edged reputation in the groves of academe. Of course, one's colleagues grudgingly allow, it's necessary, one supposes, but...well, one can't take it seriously, can one? It's not, well, *original*.

Still, one should try. I took this personally to heart, once I became a university professor, and tried ways of reaching the public with whatever insights I could provide into the bewilderingly complex enterprise that modern science has become.

This column is one such method; I've also tried fiction, essays in national magazines, newspaper interviews, radio...and television.

In the late 1980s Japanese National Broadcasting (NHK) got in touch with me about a project they had in early planning stages. It was to be a big series show on modern science, stressing the astronomical connections.

I consulted for them, reviewed memos, went to innumerable dinners with passing squads of producers, directors, and scriptwriters. Eventually they asked me to help outline the show and I gave it a working title which stuck: *A Galactic Odyssey*.

They wanted to take a very different approach to the problem of popularizing — using elements of drama alongside straight expositions, interviews, graphics and the like. What kind of frame could do that? Intriguing, I thought. I worked up a plan to shape the shows around the voyage of the starship *Hellos*, on the first flight beyond our solar system.

Most of the air time would be in documentary format. In the sf frame, we would follow the adventures of the *Helios* crew of six as they visited sites in the Milky Way. The first ninety-minute-long introductory

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segment was straight documentary. The next seven were hour-long shows, each with three dramatic scenes, at opening, middle and close, adding up to about twenty minutes.

Halfway into outlining the set of shows, they asked me to write the fictional frames. I had my misgivings. A year before I had written a TV script which did get shot, but emerged mystifyingly (sometimes infuriatingly) different from my vision.

Still, everybody I knew said this was standard for the business. The point was to work through those limitations. Since I wanted to learn more about script writing, I took the job.

By now the show was behind schedule. I wasn't surprised, since NHK had spent a year and a half planning and fidgeting and replanning. So when I received a visit about doing the scripts, they saved for last the fact that I had only a month in which to do them.

I learned something about writing under pressure. In TV writing, you must keep it simple, be direct, use sights instead of talk. I made the deadline, with two hours and twenty minutes of (estimated) drama screen time.

Writing such compact drama scripts was an education in brevity. I began to long for the elbow room of novels. There were compensations, though, in the freedom to let the audience see what you mean.

Using sf at all in the solemn format of upscale, top-ticket documentaries implies that science fictional devices are becoming commonplace vehicles. I was somewhat surprised that NHK cheerfully accepted sf ideas; they saw that showing *people* visiting exotic sites was far more immediate than merely doing better computer graphics of them.

So I indulged myself. I stretched the physics a bit and had *Helios* fly by a star just as it goes supernova. Pretty unlikely, even though they had selected the star because it was close to that point. Great graphics, but how could they survive? I let them narrowly escape, using a trick: they used a Jovian-sized planet for a shield, speeding radially outward in its shadow.

This was a cheat, actually. The neutrino flux alone would have killed them, though, even with the Jovian trick. So I gave them a neutrino shield.

Now, physics knows of nothing that can absorb neutrinos effectively, but there have been some theoretical speculations...so I yielded to temptation. A slight crack in my realism armor, perhaps, a step down the road that leads to the "wantum mechanics" of such shows as *Star Trek*—you wantum, you gettum. Anything you want, boss, and consistency from show to show be damned. Drama, y'know.

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Midway through the writing, NHK came visiting again. They had never decided how to handle the connecting up of all these elements. Perhaps it would be best to have an occasional on-camera commentator? Well, I said, that was one approach, sure. And would I please consider being this commentator?

This was much more than I had bargained for. My imagination was fixed on the blithe abstractions of writing. Actual work in front of a camera was a decidedly daunting prospect. Still...

The starship *Helios* loomed large, a clean white sphere sprouting antennas. It glided away from a barren desert planet, heading into serene deep space...

DISSOLVE TO: Traffic. Horns. Gasoline stench. Gaudy neon.

Well, I thought, we wanted a jarring cut for the opener, and this certainly fit the bill.

I was a minute into the take when the bag lady came shuffling into my field of view. If she just moved across the camera angle and kept going, I thought, maybe things would be all right. I kept on talking about alien life forms, a topic carefully selected for this location — a traffic island smack in the middle of Times Square.

"The sorts of aliens we could discover with our current approach bear a striking resemblance to the radio astronomers themselves — curious, devoted to the night sky, with lots of technology and energy. We — "

The bag lady swerved toward me and called jerkily, "Hey! Somebody's trying to start a war between us and Germany."

Well, maybe the mike wouldn't pick her up. I kept talking and got through the next sentence. If she would just keep moving —

"Don't you care? Somebody's trying to start a war between the United States and Germany!"

I shrugged. "Actually, lady, it's been done. Twice."

One of the cameramen came trotting across the traffic lanes. He waved the bag lady away, but since he spoke only Japanese, they got into a tangle of angry incomprehension.

After she had wandered off, and after a gang of Puerto Rican teenagers tried to persuade us to make them famous by letting them do their dance routine behind me, we did five more takes — seventeen in all. By that time I was feeling pretty alien myself.

Location shooting, I learned, is fraught with weirdness and accident. I had to shoot about thirty locations

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in six months for the series, which was running further and further behind schedule.

This meant, for example, standing in the rotor wash of the camera helicopter as it lifted from the floor of Meteor Crater, Arizona, smiling numbly for five takes, as the sub-zero wind blew my hair around and turned my lips blue. I wore a sports jacket and light slacks, for the sake of clothes continuity with the preceding shot, which had been two months before and thirty degrees warmer.

Location shooting also meant trying to keep the script straight in my head atop Mauna Kea, Hawaii, 13,700 feet. After a few hours of walking about, cold was the least of my problems. I found that oxygen deprivation kept snatching away bits of my memory. I would hit the end of a sentence and hang there, with no idea of what came next.

Oddly enough, it was fun.

The NHK producers were quite happy to spend, say, $300,000 creating a flyby of the black hole at the galactic center, complete with burnt-orange accretion disk and silvery jets. They even wanted me to talk about my own novels set there. Pulsars, neutron stars — anything astronomical was okay, fit for the computer graphics budget of several million dollars. This was big time TV, yes.

But aliens.... Well, maybe Godzilla had spooked them.

They wanted a whole hour about life in the galaxy, but refused to ever show aliens. My entire script about planets as potential life sites was rewritten, by a director, to treat only dead worlds. So the crew spent its time in Death Valley digging holes for the camera.

Why? I asked. Prospecting for life, the director said.

Any biologist could have told them that the atmosphere, observed by *Helios* from space, would reveal signs of life. Chemical cycles for any gas-breathing life are constrained to a fairly narrow range. This argument had been used by James Lovelock to predict that Mars would reveal no life, back in the early 1970s.

Such arguments got waved away. People could understand prospecting for life — it was just like digging for gold, see? I shook my head. Cultural mismatch.

My final script for the Times Square scene was as far as I could get the director of that segment to go:

The restless energy and technology of Times Square, its teeming people — such ferment may be what we expect of the kind of aliens whom we might contact through the search

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for extraterrestrial intelligence — SETI. They would greatly resemble ourselves. In fact, they'd be a lot like radio astronomers — curious, devoted to the night sky, with plenty of technological resources.

Yet walking through Times Square, I can't help but notice that many of my own species have motivations and interests far from those of SETI-style aliens. They're a bit hard to communicate with, even at first hand.

(CUT IN SHOT OF VAGRANT, PROSTITUTE, ETC.)

The brilliant signs here remind us that energy surplus is the unspoken assumption behind SETI. The radio listening astronomers seek aliens who are rich, curious, and technology-loving, though life may be common in our galaxy, SETI-style life may not be. It's not common in Times Square, after all.

The gaudy neon suggests another path. Even without communication, you could tell aliens were there by noticing their garbage. Some astronomers suggest that energy-rich aliens who didn't send radio broadcasts nonetheless would emit lots of heat radiation. That's because energy use always ends up as heat, which emits infrared waves. Searching the night sky for intense dabs of such radiation might turn up evidence of aliens without actual communication.

There are about ten thousand stars within a hundred light years of our sun, and that volume itself is a mere speck in the galactic disk. The search is going to be a long one.

Suppose we keep looking, and our extensive searching reveals the answer is a solid 'no'? Then a terrible responsibility falls on us. For then if we fail or die, intelligence itself fails. Further, the galaxy would then be ours to use with a free hand, but wisely — a kind of immense, cosmic burden.

While there is no detail whatever about how *Helios* worked, I did get away with basing the last hour show, "The Anvil of Time," on relativity. No super-duper faster-than-light space drive for us hardnosed types — so we got some pretty special effects of *Helios* zooming by stars at near-light speed. The crew used Einstein's time dilation to span the galaxy, so they had to pay the price.

We spent months debating whether the crew, seeing that thousands of years had passed Earthside, would return. People took rather fierce positions, some holding that the *Helios* crew would fly ever onward, drawn by mysteries. I made them return; an Odyssey has to come

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home. But then the directors refused to show the Earth or solar system altered after millennia. No orbital colonies, no signs of humans visible from space.

Why? I asked. Anti-ecological. Tampering with the natural solar system. Bad vibes. "Such changes are disturbing." An enigmatic smile. The cultural thing again.

The Japanese took an aesthetic approach to much traditional scientific material. We opened the series with a shot of leafy glades and the line, "We love natural beauty, but what does it imply?" — then cut to a rocket, the planets, and stars.

NHK spent huge sums developing a new type of camera, capable of shooting in mere moonlight. It gave high quality, fully colored pictures, so that while I walked by an observatory in Chile, you could see my red tie and also make out the bright colors of stars overhead, including Alpha Centauri, the nearest star system.

In that shot the director laughed out loud at the Carl Sagan reference when I said, "There aren't merely billions and billions of stars in our galaxy; there are a good fraction of a trillion — and maybe more."

His laugh loused up the first take, which would've been perfect. On the other hand, on a later take they caught a meteor that flashed in startling yellow overhead as a punctuation, as I finished the last line.

It helped in dealing with the producers that I could switch from sf writer to scientist at the drop of a metaphor. I was scientific advisor, host, and drama script writer. When the drama director wrote in a scene in which the *Helios* engines failed, he didn't know that devising a wholly new kind of drive on the spot was both unlikely and a genre cliché.

Merely saying so didn't dissuade him, of course. So I pointed out that the big scene, in which they reach their difficult destination by withstanding 3-g acceleration for a full minute, would take *Helios* only a few more kilometers.

Even a director could see that wasn't much on a galactic scale. So we tinkered, cut, made it not quite so askew.

The best thing about making a grueling show is the people you meet. I spent a day with Stephen Hawking, the first time I had seen him in years. He had prepared a long response to some questions I'd sent. We discussed on camera the philosophical implications of modern cosmology, and he remarked on the "argument from design" resurrected by Freeman Dyson and oth-

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ers of note. (They have used observations that the crucial numbers which govern natural laws, such as nuclear binding energies, seem extraordinarily finely tuned to the values which make life and intelligence possible. Maybe even suspiciously so.)

Hawking was skeptical. He remarked that this might provide solace for some, "but only for belief in a distant, cool, and indifferent God."

The working scientists were always a pleasure. The interminable delays for setup of lighting and cameras were great times to get caught up on shop talk.

Astronomy and physics are now thoroughly worldwide activities, threaded through with sf fans. I found Aldiss and Anderson paperbacks stashed for a dull moment in the control room of the big telescope at Las Campanas, atop the Andes Mountains of Chile.

The woman director of the Mt. Wilson Observatory took me on a tour of the under-galleries of the 100 inch scope, where Hubble measured his plates and discovered the expansion of the universe. I got to do a shot sitting in the same rickety chair Hubble used for decades to discover the expansion of the universe. That was thrilling, as was the fifteen-foot plunge only inches away. Hubble had never fallen off; I came quite close twice in a single hour.

The director took all this for granted, of course. She then asked me if I knew Hal Clement or Joe Haldeman. What were they like?

We did a shot with me standing on the Bonneville salt flats, playing on the fact that in winter they look like a snow field. This was to suggest the freezing out of our atmosphere if the Earth were a bit further from the sun. Then we switched to the opposite possibility, that a nearer sun would evaporate away our oceans, leaving meters-deep salt plains.

"Very fantastic," the director said happily.

A Park Ranger with us said skeptically, "Sounds like science fiction to me."

The director looked shocked and countered, "Oh, but it is! Of the very best kind — it is true!"

The most imaginative element NHK would allow in the documentary was a series of paintings by Bill Hartmann, the astronomer-artist at Kitt Peak Observatory, a most pleasant fellow.

We worked out a water-world sporting only minor islands, with sea life just beginning to discover simple technology. A gloomy city loomed in

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the background of his undersea painting. We shot a discussion between Bill and myself of the possibilities available in odd planets. A tide-locked world with a thin, life-supporting twilight zone. Twin inhabited planets — one with an oxygen atmosphere, the other still methane-dominated. An inhabited moon. The documentary director wanted all these discussed, but the drama director would have no part of them in *his* show...

I learned a lot about how science and sf interact. The Los Angeles public television station, KCET, was producing a rival show, *The Astronomers*, to air in fall 1990. I saw rushes from it, then the final show. While its desire to show the life of scientists was commendable, I was reminded that from the outside, watching us work is remarkably like a long, close scrutiny of paint drying. Still, the speculations of scientists are just as wild as anything we sf writers do; theirs are merely government-funded.

It's an unnerving experience, standing in a Los Angeles studio and watching actors play out scenes you've written, word for word. Quite solid and quite uncanny, like walking into one of your own dreams. It took far longer to shoot a script than it did to write one.

It's even stranger to turn from the set and look into the synthesizing eye of the monitors, where the set image was superimposed on the graphics, in real time. I could see beyond the *Helios* crew the swirling, technicolor disk of a monstrous black hole.

This ability to place frail human figures against the immensity of creation is powerful, and is only beginning to be dramatically realized. In counterpoint to all this techno-razzledazzle, I had to underline in the closing comments that our goal in understanding nature is in part to fathom ourselves, our uniquely human place in nature.

I found it doubly striking that the churn and dazzle of warped space-time is still an idea of ours — a metaphor, if you will — not yet truly confirmed by observation. Increasingly, the objects of high science are fictions toward which reason and inference lead us. They will remain unseen, glimpsed only with the lens of scrupulous deduction — and with the telescope of our imaginations.

I ended the entire series with the only real indulgence the mass of producers and directors allowed. The NHK method was a sort of corporate mentality gone mad — each hour had a separate authority, with whom I negotiated the script. This is how I

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tried to sum it all up, with my own personal flavor:

I hope that the interwoven strands of the sciences can lead to a philosophy for our century which will be of one piece, reflecting the seamless connection we have to this world that came out of nothingness and into something so vast and various.

A great astronomer, Harold Shapley, once said, "We are the brothers of boulders, the companions of clouds." Astronomers know that we are also the sons of the stars.

Yet the stars are mortal, just as we. Our galaxy is the stage for a drama of worlds being born and dying, while even mighty galaxies collide, shatter, and merge. In grand diversity the action continues.

Biology teaches us that if somewhere along the way evolution had made a small change in the script, we humans would not be here. We are fragile — but so, in the long run, is the universe.

The galaxy is still young, only 10 billion years old. Within 20 billion more the stars which nurtured life will ebb, growing cooler, redder. The giant blue stars will be gone forever. The galaxy will dim as black holes grow. There will be fewer warm spots for life. The milky way will witness the final act, a long twilight struggle, and if life remains anchored to planets, it is doomed.

I take a brighter view of the far future. Just as astrology once said that the stars rule the affairs of men, I believe, as Arthur Clarke put it, that the time will come when men rule the affairs of stars.

Life's greatest challenge will be survival after the stars are gone. As Shakespeare said,

Now entertain conjecture of a time
when creeping murmur and the poring dark
fills the wide vessel of the universe.

Life — that is, mind — arose out of matter. The grandest philosophical question is, will all life's struggles come to naught? Can we survive the gathering cold and dark? Will the universe slow, contract, and collapse, reversing the big bang? Astronomers' quest for the shadowy dark matter will perhaps answer this question.

I believe that life will persist through the dimming of the galaxy, the growth of monstrous black holes, even through the eventual decay of matter itself into nothing more than electrons, their anti-particles, and light. I hope there will always be a role in the galaxy's evolution for beings capable of knowing joy. As the poet T.S. Eliot

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put it, "We are the music, while the music lasts."

We shot all that, but when the final editing got done, only about half got through. Still, NHK wedged a lot into the series, and it aired repeatedly in Japan, its first venue, in 1990 through 1991.

It won the Japanese version of the Emmy for Best General Program. It showed in 1991 in Europe, in translation. NHK published a five-book series, full of gorgeous color photography, graphics, and with short introductions by myself. They sold well.

Then nothing happened. The show had ended up costing over $6 million, the biggest budget overrun NHK had ever had, and they needed to sell it in the U.S. market.

But the NHK structure took nearly all support money away from the program as soon as the final cut came out. Negotiations with U.S. networks were cordial, but the program needed editing. The Japanese style is alternately leisurely, with long panning shots, and then jerky. But there was no money for reediting.

So the entire project fell into a corporate hole, one step short of the major market that could make the whole enterprise profitable. KCET's *The Astronomers* had fallen on its face in the market, with a less than ten percent of the audience that Sagan's *Cosmos* garnered a decade earlier. The word was out that astronomy shows didn't work.

This tendency of TV and films to ride on conventional wisdom about the market is notorious, and amusing. Once I saw a letter written on luxurious stationery by a studio maven, about buying an option on a novel of mine about Greek archeology, *Artifact*. "Nobody goes to movies about archeology," he said. "Too intellectual and dry." This was a year after release of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

Nothing kept on happening.

So *A Galactic Odyssey* never showed in the U.S. The Carnegie Institute did re-edit the first episode for brief showings, but not the series. NHK broke up the entire team and the project is now solely in the hands of marketing, which means no creative people involved. They have shown it around and it is reasonably well received, I hear. But it would need reworking for the more sophisticated American market, and there's nobody around any longer to do that delicate job.

People ask me about it, and I just shake my head. What did I learn from the fully three year involvement, finally?

First, novelists don't fit well in intensely committee-dominated

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projects. Decisions about showing aliens, or even categorizing civilizations by their energy consumption (somehow, not an ecologically virtuous point of view), were made by faceless executives — most of whom had no scientific training whatever. And who don't think that's important.

Novelists think in larger chunks. Hard sf novelists probably don't make the best diplomats, either, about scientific facts. Or at least, *this* novelist didn't.

Second, don't let the scientific content get compromised for schedule or convenience. Realize that just about nobody else has the same commitment to the material that scientists do — but apply pressure at the essential points.

Third, use a particular rhythm in presenting science, to draw out its human aspects. This rhythm runs,

philosophy—>science—>philosophy

Begin with a grand overview, posing certain human or social problems as they relate to science. Then go to the science, the technical true grit, that can then lead back to those deep philosophical issues. Offer a response, maybe even a solution, on the basis of the scientific content just detailed.

This rhythm opens the sciences, imbuing large human issues with the flagrant excitement of the new, the fresh, the real. You can even yield to calls for a new vision or morality, speaking from the solidity of scientific pulpit.

In both visual and print media, this has been the style of the best broad scientific popularizations of the last few decades. Recall Steven Weinberg's *The First Three Minutes*, Douglas Hofstader's *Gödel, Escher, and Bach*, Sagan's *Cosmos*, Edward O. Wilson's *On Human Nature* and many others.

Lastly, have some input in editing. Much of *A Galactic Odyssey* got rearranged, slanted and cut by people who knew little or nothing of the technical material. Such power is hard to get, but essential.

A minor point: never do location shooting without firm guidelines. Otherwise, you are the tool of the lighting, camera and sound crews. I waited atop Mt. Wilson from 9 P.M. until 2 A.M. for the crews to set up. It was a chilly January night and after rehearsing, there wasn't much to do. Then I had to do moving-and-speaking shots over precarious walkways outside the big dome of the observatory, while worn out.

We finished at 4 AM. I looked pretty awful on camera, too, and nearly went off a hundred foot drop; but the lighting, Benford-san, was perfect...

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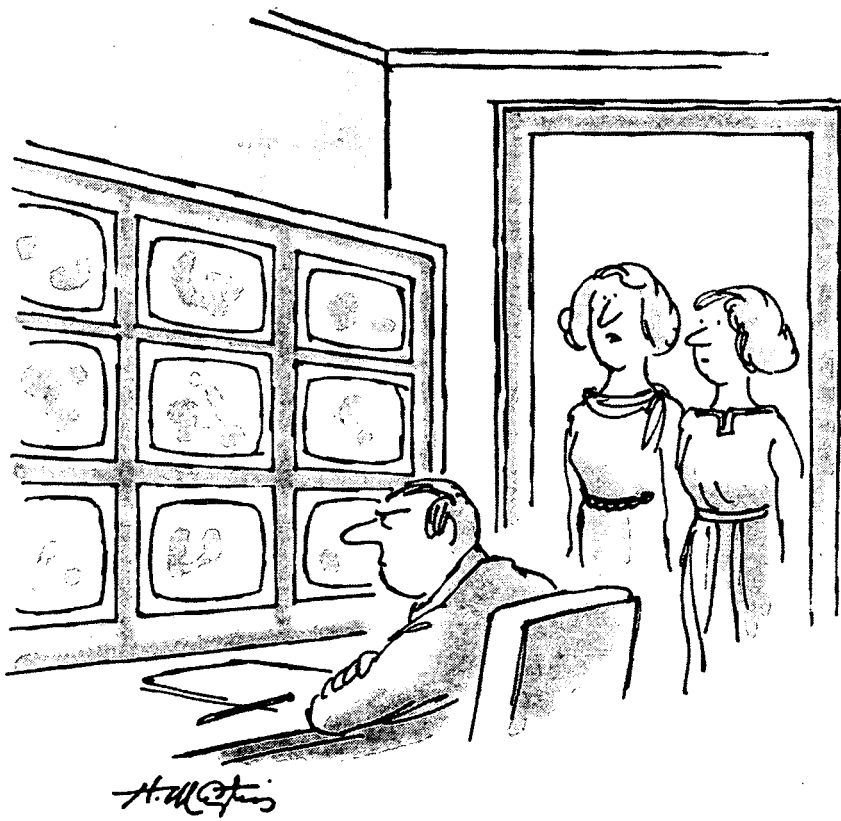
Science is harder to popularize than most areas, because its material is arcane, dense and, for many, forbidding, even frightening.

But scientists themselves must keep trying. They aren't particularly skilled — I learned that I certainly wasn't — but the general media do an even worse job of it.

And of course, much of the process is, to the scientific mind, disagreeable.

But what's the alternative?

Comments (and objections!) to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. For e-mail: gbenford@uci.edu.



"This is where Henry keeps an eye on a number of potentially explosive situations."

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When writers ask why we don't publish more wizard stories, I point to our John Morressy's Kedrigern series (which we have published for over a decade now) and respond, "Why should we when we already publish the best!" Only a handful of wizards can compare to Kedrigern. Even that mythical favorite, Merlin, sometimes has trouble keeping up.

"Nest Egg" is Kedrigern's most recent adventure. Enjoy.

Nest Egg

By John Morressy

UNLIKE CERTAIN OTHER mythical creatures, the griffin has never gained acceptance as a suitable domestic companion.

A dragon raised from the egg can be very useful around the house, especially for lighting a fire quickly on chilly mornings. The only drawback to a dragon, aside from size, is the risk of a cough or sneeze setting off an unintended conflagration. But preventive measures can be taken. Early removal of the fire-breathing organs (a painless alteration if done in the creature's first half-century) renders a dragon not only safe but sleek, docile, and affectionate. According to experts on the subject, the procedure also improves general health and extends the life span. Altered dragons are said to be especially good with children.

A troll, if taken young and raised within a caring family group, can be an invaluable help, particularly in the kitchen. Close supervision is required until it learns to follow recipes exactly, but a properly trained troll is fit to serve as chef to a king.

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Even a unicorn, though high-strung and picky about living conditions, can be a pleasing and useful home companion. Unicorns require constant attention and firm handling, but they are clean, attractive creatures and discourage lions from hanging about.

A griffin is something else entirely. For one thing, a griffin is very big. It is also very noisy. It has few social graces and makes no effort to acquire any. Its disposition is unpredictable, its strength awesome, its anger terrible. Even the spelling of its name can lead to controversy: disputes are frequent among those who spell it *griffin, griffon,* and *gryphon.* Granted, a griffin will keep a home free of rats and mice; but its appetite is not satisfied by small creatures. It considers a dog or cat an appetizer, and a pony a light but satisfying supper. A pair of well-fed Belgians seventeen hands high would be no more than a filling meal. People of sense and good judgment do not attempt to domesticate a griffin. They keep their dealings with griffins to a minimum when they are unable to avoid them altogether.

Thus Kedrigern's surprise at the content of an urgent communiqué from an old client. He unfurled the scroll with interest. The message was gorgeously rubricated, formal in style and diction, but the intent was plain and unmistakable.

__To__ the justly famed and powerful wizard Kedrigern, master of counterspells and disenchantments, from his friend and comrade Tyasan, Lord of the Misty Marshes.

__Whereas__ Cecil, our cherished household griffin, has not eaten in three weeks, is molting in an unsightly way, and does not respond to treatment; and

__Whereas__ the physicians and chirurgeons of the court are unable to find the cause of this noble creature's suffering, much less a cure for it, and

__Whereas__ the aforesaid Cecil's condition manifests signs of magical origin, viz. a malediction placed upon him by enemies of the kingdom with the aim of distressing, discomposing, and discomfiting Our Royal Self and the Royal Family,

__Therefore__ your presence is urgently required at Castle Contre-coeur. Come at once.

Kedrigern flung the message to the floor, where it promptly rolled itself up. He paced about the room, muttering and kicking the scroll before him, and at last he snatched it up, dropped into a chair, and glared into the fire.

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His wife looked into the doorway. "What is it now?"

He thrust the scroll at her. "This. It just arrived. From Tyasan."

"I don't recall the name. Do we know him?"

"He has a small kingdom off to the north of the Dismal Bog. I did him a service nine or ten years ago, and now he wants me to drop everything and run to his aid again."

Princess took the scroll and opened it out on the table, placing heavy candelabra at top and bottom to keep it from rerolling. She read it over and said, "It seems reasonable. He's got a sick griffin on his hands, and he wants you to help. Can't you?"

"He wants a physician. A very highly specialized physician. I'm a wizard. I don't do griffins."

"Griffins are mythical creatures. Maybe they require treatment by a wizard."

Kedrigern reflected on that for a moment, then shook his head. "Not so far as I know. I've heard of griffins being cured by holy men, but not by wizards."

"This might be a special case."

Kedrigern scowled. "Kings always think their problems are a special case."

Placing her arms akimbo, Princess gave him a straight look. "My father was a king."

Kedrigern was willing to give a bit, but not too much. "I'm sure he was a very nice king. But I never met your father. Most of the kings I've met have been...well, just look at that note! The arrogance of the man! As if he need only snap his fingers and I'm to drop everything I'm doing and run off to hold his griffin's talon and pour syrups down its throat. I've just come back from working a very difficult counterspell, and he — "

"If you're going to call yourself a master counterspeller, you can't complain when someone asks you to work a counterspell."

"It's the *way* they ask."

"Well, if Tyasan's an old friend — "

Kedrigern flung up his hands in frustration. "He's not! That's what annoys me most, this pretense that we're old pals. He didn't say a dozen words to me when I was there last, and now he tries to sound like a boyhood chum."

"Don't be impatient with him. The man's desperate. It's possible to become very fond of a pet."

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"My dear, no one knows better than you that I'm a patient man. The soul of kindness. I am filled with love for all living things, griffins included. But only a very silly man keeps a griffin as a household pet, and I resent being summoned to the aid of a silly man because the consequences of his silliness have finally caught up with him."

Princess raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. She returned her attention to the scroll.

In a milder tone, Kedrigern went on, "I don't like to refuse help to an old client — even when he's presumptuous and demanding — but I don't know anything about healing sick griffins."

"Tyasan says that the griffin might be spelled. You know about despelling victims of wicked spells."

"I'm sure the reference to a spell is a desperate guess on the part of the physicians. It's highly unlikely that Cecil has been spelled. If anyone with sense wanted to discompose the royal family, they'd put the spell on them, not on their griffin."

"Would they?" said Princess. She pointed with a delicate fingertip to a handwritten addendum far down in the parchment, below the point to which Kedrigern had unrolled it. He rose, grumbling, and joined her at the table. The postscript read:

Please come, Dear K. The children will be heartbroken if they lose their Cecil.

Your old comrade, Tyasan.

Kedrigern gazed long at the message. He looked up helplessly and sighed.

Princess let the scroll furl and tapped the ends into neat alignment. "I'll tell Spot to start packing. We'll leave in the morning," she said.

"We?"

"You don't think I'm going to pass up a chance to visit a royal court, do you? Even if it means sitting up with a sick griffin."

The castle of Contre-coeur was five days' unhurried ride from the cottage on Silent Thunder Mountain, and the weather was ideal for travel. The skies were clear, the sun bright. The roads had dried after the spring rains, but summer had not yet encumbered the land with heat and dust and small

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insects and crowds. Traffic, in fact, was nonexistent. The woods were splashed with shadings of green highlighted with the brightness of flowers. Fragrance and birdsong filled the air. All appeared tranquil, but Kedrigern felt increasingly ill at ease. Finally, on the morning of the fifth day, he reined in his horse and dropped back to Princess' side.

"There are people nearby," he said.

"It's the season for traveling."

"I know it is, and yet we haven't seen a soul on the road so far. Now I sense a large crowd, and they're not in a friendly mood. Probably robbers and marauders."

"Are you sure? There's not much to rob out here, is there?"

"There's us."

Princess looked thoughtful. "Well, I'm sure you can handle a band — " she began, when an arrow whistled between them, others zipped overhead, and a loud shout came from the wood.

"Let's go!" Kedrigern cried, casting a quick shielding spell around them as he dug his heels in. They galloped to the last bend in the forest road, where a barrier blocked their way. No sooner had they halted than a score of archers, bows at the ready, emerged from the surrounding wood and six pikemen advanced on them, led by a swordsman.

"It's all right, my dear. These are Tyasan's men," said Kedrigern.

"Stand and unfold yourselves!" the swordsman demanded.

"We are friends to this ground, come at the request of King Tyasan. I am the wizard Kedrigern, and this lady is my wife and colleague."

At the name, the swordsman sheathed his blade and said, in a much more cordial tone, "Welcome to the Kingdom of the Misty Marshes. You are fortunate indeed to have come this far in safety."

"We encountered some bandits in the forest."

"Not bandits, wizard, but enemies of the kingdom. Alas, since the sickness of the Chief Defender of the Realm has become known, our enemies have grown bold. Three outlying hamlets have been raided. An invasion may come at any moment."

"Tyasan didn't mention that. We'd better hurry."

"I will provide you with a guide."

"No need, no need. I know the way," said Kedrigern, urging his horse forward. "Just raise that barrier."

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They reached the castle in the early afternoon, and were welcomed to Contre-coeur and the Kingdom of the Misty Marshes by Tyasan himself. The king was wreathed in smiles, and greeted them warmly.

"My good old friend, we knew you would come. Our troubles now are over," he said, embracing Kedrigern. "And this must be your wife, as famed for her magical talent as for her beauty and wisdom."

Princess rose from her saddle with a flutter of her gauzy little wings and flew lightly to Tyasan's side as the king looked on in astonishment. She curtseyed gracefully.

"We have heard you praised for many qualities, my lady, but we knew nothing of your ability to fly, " said Tyasan.

"It's just something I picked up on a quest," she said with a delicate gesture of dismissal.

"The royal children will be delighted to meet someone at once so lovely, so charming, and so gifted. You must be kind to them. They are much troubled by Cecil's condition."

"How old are they, Tyasan? They weren't even born when I was here last."

The king beamed upon them. "I remember the occasion well. I had only recently wed my fair queen Thrymm. She was sorely afflicted, but you came to her aid, old friend."

"What was her problem?" Princess asked.

"Spiders."

"Isn't it customary to call an exterminator?"

"These spiders popped out of Thrymm's mouth every time she spoke," Kedrigern explained.

"It was especially unpleasant when she talked in her sleep," Tyasan said with a slight shudder of distaste. "A single oversight in drawing up the guest list, and it caused us no end of inconvenience and distress. You can imagine how punctilious we were in sending out invitations to the royal christenings."

Kedrigern, not having received an invitation to either christening, was about to speak, but Princess silenced him with a stern glance. He held back his retort and instead asked, "This problem with the griffin, Tyasan. How long has...?"

Oblivious, Tyasan went on, "Ah, those were the good old days, were they not? How I miss those long walks, those stimulating games of chess, those

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late night conversations over a goblet of excellent wine, with the fire roaring. Many a time have we seen the sun rise after a night of fine talk." He heaved a nostalgic sigh and clapped Kedrigern warmly on the shoulder. "We really must keep in touch, old friend."

Tyasan's cozy memories were pure fiction. Kedrigern again started to speak, but Princess asked, "And what are the ages of the little prince and princess, your highness?"

"Please, my dear, call me Tyasan. Better still, call me Ty. All my close friends do, and I count you both among my closest friends."

"And your children?"

He gave her a puzzled look. "I count them as family."

"I meant their ages. How old are they?"

"Ah, yes, of course. Their ages. Eldry is the older by a year. She'll be about eight or so very soon. And that would make Ashel about seven. Give or take a year or two. Yes, that sounds right."

"And they're fond of this griffin?"

"My lady, they dote on the creature, and he is devoted to them. Cecil was a christening gift to...one or the other. I can't recall now. The three of them have grown up together."

"An unusual christening gift, isn't it?"

"A most unusual gift indeed, my lady. He was sent by a distant cousin from the land of the Scythians. They have many strange customs in that part of the world."

Kedrigern, recalling that one of the nastier Scythian customs had something to do with feeding unruly children to a griffin, felt a twinge of alarm. "Your cousin, or Queen Thrymm's?"

"Mine. Charming old fellow, Gulberan. Soul of generosity. Immensely fond of children. Everyone loved him. We were very close."

Tyasan's word were reassuring, but Kedrigern wanted more. "Have you many Scythian relatives?"

"None at all. Never did. Gulberan only went to Scythia for the climate. That and the gold. Gold all over the place in Scythia, you know. Common as grass. Peasants thatch their hovels with it. Birds use it to build their nests. But enough small talk. You must come inside. Thrymm is around the palace somewhere. She'll want to meet you, unless she's resting. This business with Cecil has her depressed. Makes her sleepy."

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"The prospect of invasion must be upsetting for her," said Kedrigern.

"Oh, that. Yes, I suppose so. No cause for concern, though. Once Cecil is up and about, the neighbors will quiet down and there'll be no more talk of invasion."

Kedrigern nodded. He tried to look confident. This was a far more serious matter than he had anticipated.

Tyasan took Princess' arm and said in a confiding way, "You'll meet Thrymm when we dine, in any event. I expect you'd like to wash up and take a nap before dinner. Travel is so fatiguing, and we've got quite a night planned. Feasting, dancing, music. Jugglers, tumblers, performing dogs. Just like old times. eh, Kedrigern?"

Princess brightened at every word Tyasan spoke. By the time he was done, she was fluttering a full hand's breadth off the ground. "It sounds wonderful!" With a sharp glance at Kedrigern, she added, "One does sacrifice certain amenities when one lives in isolation on a mountaintop."

Kedrigern did not share her exhilaration. If he could not cure Cecil, he knew, he would be obliged to help defend Tyasan's little kingdom against invasion, and he disliked such work. It was always unpleasant. Sometimes it was downright nasty. "I'd better have a look at Cecil."

"He's in his shed on the wall, next to the north tower."

"I'll go now, if you don't mind. Care to come along, my dear?"

"I leave it all in your hands," said Princess, practically glowing. "I have a thousand things to do to get ready for this evening."

CECIL DWELT in a spacious, well-constructed shed on the lee side of the tower. As Kedrigern approached, he saw a boy and a girl sitting beside the entry. From a distance, their posture suggested dejection; up close, their expressions confirmed it. But the moment they caught sight of him they sprang up and ran to his side to welcome him with joyous shouts.

The girl cried, "You're the wizard Daddy sent for! Aren't you? Tell us you are!"

"Of course you are! You'll make our Cecil well again so he can go out and tear our enemies to bits!" said the boy, taking Kedrigern's hand and tugging him toward the shed.

Clearly these were Eldry and Ashel. Kedrigern was impressed by the children's perceptiveness. He made it a point to dress plainly and avoid

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displaying indications of his profession. It avoided complications. "I'll do everything I can. How could you tell I was a wizard?"

"Daddy sent for a wizard. You had to come," Ashel said.

"And besides, nobody but a wizard would dare to come near Cecil. The others are all afraid of him. Especially the physicians."

"You don't seem afraid of him," Kedrigern said.

"Cecil is our friend and protector. He's really a very nice griffin. He always sounds cross, but he's not the least bit nasty, not really."

They stopped at the entry and the children released his hands. "You'd better go in alone," Eldry said. "We'll be right outside."

"Don't be afraid," said Ashel. "He won't hurt you."

Cecil lay sprawled on a thick bed of straw. His breathing was a loud wheeze. His mouth, once red as a roaring furnace, was a pale pink. His eyes, big as basins, were glazed and bloodshot. The plumage of his head and wings, brilliant no longer, appeared dusty and faded and very patchy. Flies clustered about sores on his tawny hide. His ribs were clearly visible. Huge black, red, blue, and white feathers were scattered everywhere. He appeared to be in worse condition than Tyasan had claimed.

His disposition, however, was still griffin-like. As soon as he became aware of the wizard's presence, he raised his head, opened his fierce hooked beak, and in a grating voice said, "What do you mean, bursting in here like that? Go away! If I catch you prowling around my lair again, I'll dismember you!"

Kedrigern was unintimidated. "King Tyasan has asked me here to see what can be done about your condition."

"Get lost, butcher. I'm in perfect health."

"I will not leave until I've examined you."

Struggling unsteadily to his feet, Cecil said, "That's what you think. Try to take one drop of my blood, and you'll lose your own. All of it."

"I'm not a physician, I'm a wizard."

"Prove it: make yourself disappear."

"Tyasan thinks there's a possibility you've been spelled."

Cecil gave a quick snarling laugh. "Fat lot Tyasan knows. I can take any spell they throw at me. I'm a griffin."

"All the same, I have to check." The griffin hissed and snapped his beak, but made no further hostile move. Kedrigern drew out his medallion and

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inspected Cecil through the Aperture of True Vision. He found no trace of enchantment.

"All right, you checked. Now run off and collect your fee."

"I want to do a few more tests," Kedrigern said. He reached out to give Cecil a reassuring pat.

"Lay a hand on me and your name is Lefty."

"Cecil, you have to cooperate. Tyasan is worried. The queen is distraught. The kingdom is in danger. Eldry and Ashel — "

Cecil raised a thick foreleg and flexed four wicked-looking talons. "Leave those kids out of it, you hear? Anybody messes with those kids, he answers to me."

"I'm here for their sake, Cecil. They're worried about you."

"Shut up."

"If anything happens to you, they'll be heartbroken."

"Shut up, I said! All I need is a good rest. Go away and maybe I can get it."

Kedrigern could see that he was going to get no more out of Cecil. He had already learned that no magic was involved, and that was useful to know. And Cecil was apparently as fond of the children as they were of him. That might provide an approach. But griffins are short tempered; to press Cecil further would probably do more harm than good. "All right, Cecil, I'll leave you now," the wizard said. "But I'll be back."

"Don't hurry."

"I'll be back tomorrow."

"Maybe I'll be lucky and die in my sleep." Cecil slumped down in the straw, turned his back on the wizard, and almost at once began to snore.

Once outside, Kedrigern was confronted with two expectant, hopeful faces.

"Is he well? Did you make him better?" Ashel demanded.

"It's too soon to say. But I've learned a few things. Maybe you can help me."

"We are at your service," said Eldry with queenly dignity. "Anything for our dear Cecil."

"How long has he been like this?"

"Since the spring," Eldry said, and Ashel nodded and added, "Early in the spring."

"Has it ever happened before?"

"Never," they said in one voice.

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"Did he eat anything unusual? Catch a chill? Sustain an injury? Did you observe any odd behavior?" the wizard asked, receiving an unequivocal negative each time.

Eldry began, "He was perfectly fine. At the end of winter he gave his lair a thorough cleaning and built himself a lovely new nest of fresh straw — "

"And then he got sick," Ashel broke in.

Kedrigern nodded and stroked his chin thoughtfully, doing his best to convey an impression of confidence. "Thank you both. You've been a help."

Ashel tugged at the wizard's sleeve. "Do you know what's wrong?"

"Can you fix it?" Eldry asked.

"I've narrowed my field of inquiry. I'll be back to see Cecil in the morning. Perhaps then I'll be able to determine the exact problem."

"Please do it, wizard. Save our Cecil," Said Ashel, looking up with moist eyes. He turned away, unwilling to let his tears be seen, and Eldry whispered to Kedrigern, "You must. Poor Ashel would never get over it if we lost the dear creature. And we'd be invaded, besides."

"I'll do everything in my power. And if I can't help Cecil myself, I'll do my best to find someone who can. Now let's all go back to the castle and have a nice snack, and let Cecil get some rest."

There was no time, and little inclination, for shop talk before dinner. Throughout the evening, over one elaborate and superbly prepared dish after another, amid the singing of minstrels and the whirling of dancers and the tumbling of dogs and acrobats, the drinking of toasts and the bursts of merry laughter, Kedrigern pondered the case. He was able to do so without interruption; Princess, looking her loveliest, was the center of all eyes. No one paid attention to a moody wizard, nor to the haggard, dusty messengers who turned up at frequent intervals with urgent messages for the king.

Kedrigern had much to ponder. Griffins were famed for their rugged good health. He had never read or heard of griffins' ailments, and knew no griffins personally, so he had no ready source of information. Griffins, so far as he knew, were not prey to sickness. And yet Cecil was definitely sick. Could he be some odd species of griffin? Had he succumbed to an illness unknown in Scythia? Was he getting the proper food? Enough to drink? Could the climate of the Misty Marshes be affecting his health? These were all questions to be asked tomorrow.

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Princess settled beside Kedrigern, breathless and happy. "I haven't had such a delightful time in ages! The courtiers are charming. And the musicians are excellent. And everyone dances so well."

"I notice you've been dancing every dance."

"Yes. And you haven't left your seat."

"You know I'm a terrible dancer, my dear. And I'm worried about Cecil. He looks awful, and he's not the least bit cooperative."

"Griffins aren't, as a rule, are they?"

"I don't like to think of the children losing their pet and then having the kingdom invaded."

"Is he *that* bad?"

"I'm afraid so. Come and see for yourself tomorrow."

She rose and took him by the hand. "I will. And I'm sure you'll think of something. Now come and dance. It will do you good."

"Oh, I really don't...."

"Come. It's a very easy one. You'll pick it up in no time."

They slept late next day. It was mid-morning when they climbed to the platform where Cecil's shed stood. Kedrigern had expected to find the royal children awaiting them, but Cecil was alone.

"You again. I told you to keep away," he said in welcome.

"Tyasan gives the orders here, and he wants me to look after you."

"Who's this? Your assistant?"

"I am a princess," said Princess with dignity.

Cecil yawned. "Good for you. Who asked you to butt in?"

"There's no need to be rude, Cecil. We're here to help you. We want to get you back to normal."

"If I were feeling normal, I'd be a lot ruder. Now go away and leave me alone. It's bad enough to feel rotten without having nosy intruders barging in on my privacy."

Kedrigern was not to be put off. "Where does it hurt, Cecil?"

"None of your business."

"I'm just going to keep asking until I get an answer."

Princess frowned at Kedrigern. "Don't be so inconsiderate to the poor dear creature." She turned to Cecil and said in her sweetest voice, "You're very brave, Cecil. I'll bet your poor head is aching terribly, but you don't complain."

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Cecil glared at her for a moment, then muttered, "I can take it."

"Oh, you poor brave thing," she said.

"Stop pooring me, lady. I'm a griffin. We're tough."

"Of course you are. Tough, and brave, and decent. And loyal to King Tyasan. And devoted to the royal children. And all this time your head is throbbing, throbbing, throbbing." Princess wiped her eyes.

His voice somewhat less rasping, Cecil said, "Not really. The headache comes and goes. It's the loss of appetite that bothers me the most. And the general lassitude."

"Dear good Cecil," said Princess. She reached out cautiously to stroke the griffin's forehead. He did not shrink from her touch. She dug her fingers into the feathers and scratched the broad expanse. Cecil closed his eyes and made a sound like a kind of creaky purring. "Don't you want anything at all to eat?" she asked.

Dreamily, Cecil said, "Not a thing, lady. Just keep scratching. Get the back of my neck."

With a quick wink to Kedrigern, Princess leaned closer and applied both hands to her work. Cecil sank down, his eyes closed contentedly, and his purring grew to a reverberating drone that filled the shed. Princess knelt at his side and scratched. After a time, Cecil said sleepily, "You know, lady, I could go for a nice basin of horse meat broth. Maybe they could put a few chunks of meat in it."

"We'll have it brought up right away."

"Send the wizard. You stay here and keep scratching."

She turned to Kedrigern and shrugged. He nodded and tiptoed from the shed.

On his way to the kitchen he met Eldry and Ashel. They looked at him accusingly, and Ashel said, "You're late."

"Your father does not encourage early rising on the part of his guests. And I've made progress. Cecil has asked for a basin of broth."

"Is that all?"

"He'd like a few chunks of meat in it."

The children exchanged a solemn glance. Eldry said, "That's a good sign."

"He let my wife scratch his head. And he's purring."

"Is your wife pretty? He likes to have his head scratched by pretty ladies."

Kedrigern smiled at the image of Princess, resplendent this morning in a deep maroon gown trimmed at wrists and neckline with gold embroidery;

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no jewelry but a golden circlet around her gleaming black hair and a long gold necklace that hung to her waist. "She's very pretty indeed. Look here — why don't you supervise the making of the broth? You know how Cecil likes it. I'll go back and keep an eye on him."

They were off at a run, and Kedrigern returned to the hut. He stood in the doorway for a time, looking on in silence as Princess scratched Cecil's great neck and his upper back between the shoulders. Her treatment was working wonders; he had shown improvement from her very first touch and was now reclining peacefully, snoring with a faint, not unpleasant, whistling sound.

It was strenuous work for Princess. She was forced to lean forward awkwardly. From time to time she paused to ease her back and flex her fingers, but the pauses were brief and she quickly resumed her work. She was a picture of selfless dedication, and Kedrigern felt proud of her. Not many princesses would be so considerate of a griffin.

But why was it working? Surely mere head-scratching, even by the hand of a princess, could not be the cure. As Kedrigern watched, he noticed that as Princess bent over Cecil, her gold necklace lay against the griffin's side. Something in the scene tugged at his memory, but he could not quite grasp it. Something about griffins...and gold....Griffins and gold...Scythia... thatching...and the making of nests.

And that was it.

He hurried to Princess' side and whispered, "You can stop scratching. I'm going to put your necklace around Cecil's neck. He'll be all right now."

"He will?"

"For a while, anyway."

"That's not a magic necklace, you know."

"It's gold. That's all that matters."

She rose stiffly and wrung her hands. "Good. I wouldn't want to do that for much longer. Cecil has very rough feathers."

He took her hands gently in his. "You won't have to do it again."

"I take it you've figured out what's wrong with him."

"I'm pretty sure. Whether or not we can fix it depends on how much Tyasan thinks of his griffin."

They gathered in an antechamber just off the throne room. Tyasan and Thrymm, having heard the wizard's explanation and Princess' anecdotal

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support, exchanged a long silent glance. Tyasan turned to his guests.

"A nest of gold?" he said.

Kedrigern nodded. "That's what it will take."

"A nest for Cecil would require a huge amount of gold. I wouldn't have anything left to pay your fee."

With a generous wave of his hand, Kedrigern said, "We're willing to accept gems and silver. Your Cecil is suffering from acute gold deprivation. If you want him to be his old self, you'll have to provide him with a nest of gold."

Tyasan looked pained. "Are you absolutely sure?"

"As soon as Princess' gold necklace touched him, Cecil relaxed and his appetite returned. That's when I realized."

"Couldn't it have been the scratching of his neck? Maybe if all my subjects took turns scratching...."

"It wasn't my scratching that did it," Princess said, "although I'm sure it helped. Long after I had stopped, Cecil finished his basin of broth and called for a haunch of horse meat."

"He spoke of flying out to the borders tomorrow, and seeing what the neighbors are up to," Kedrigern added. "I think you can stop worrying about an invasion."

With a sigh of relief, Thrymm said, "Cecil's himself again."

"But it won't last unless he stays in contact with a substantial amount of gold. Once griffins reach a certain age, it's essential to their health. That's why they use gold for nesting material back in Scythia," Kedrigern said.

"They only use it because it's so easily available. There's gold lying all over the place in Scythia. Everyone knows that," said Tyasan.

"Everyone may be wrong. How much gold did your cousin Gulberan amass during his stay?"

Tyasan reflected for a moment, then looked at them with an expression of discomfort. "None, as a matter of fact. Poor old chap died penniless." When neither Kedrigern nor Princess made reply, he went on desperately, "What if we used brass? I'd have it polished up. It could pass for gold if we kept it polished."

"Griffins are rude, but they're not stupid. Cecil wouldn't last long, and he'd be a mighty angry griffin toward the end."

"Couldn't you hypnotize him, or create an illusion of some sort?"

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Kedrigern shook his head. "It has to be real gold. Substitutions won't work."

They sat in silence, pondering the problem, and Princess looked up brightly and said, "Just as a temporary measure you might try gold leaf."

"Or maybe a nice cloth of gold blanket," Kedrigern added. "But only until you can get enough gold together for a nest."

"We'll demand reparations from our neighbors," said Thrymm. "They ought to do something to make up for all the annoyance they've caused with their talk of invasion."

Tyasan stared dejectedly at the ground, slowly shaking his head. "They haven't got a thimbleful of gold among them. All we'll get from that lot is hides and firewood."

The four sat silent for a time. Thrymm raised her eyes to the heavens and said, "Why couldn't Gulberan have sent the children a dog?"

"Maybe there are no dogs in Scythia."

The queen shrugged. "All right, a cat. Even a monkey would be less trouble."

"As protection, Cecil is worth a brigade of guards. He's devoted to Eldry and Ashel. They couldn't have a better companion. Once he has his strength back, he'll be able to take them flying. Dogs and cats can't do that," Kedrigern pointed out. "Or monkeys."

"But all that gold...."

Princess said, "It's not as though he'll eat the gold, or squander it foolishly. It will all be right there in his shed."

"That's true," said Thrymm without much enthusiasm.

"And well guarded," Princess added.

"*Too* well guarded," said Tyasan.

"If you really need it, Ty, I'm sure Cecil will let you have some," the queen said.

Tyasan looked at his wife, his face a mask of gloom. "I know you're trying to console me, Thrymmie dear, but it's unpleasant for a king to contemplate asking household help for a loan. It's demeaning."

A long silence followed, broken at last by Kedrigern. Putting his fingertips together, gazing into the middle distance, speaking in the manner of one expounding an interesting speculation, he said, "Since Cecil is in the nest-building mood, it probably won't be long before he's ready to settle down. He'll return to Scythia to seek a mate — "

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"What will I do for protection?" Tyasan cried. "Without Cecil, I'll have to hire an army! Either way, I'm ruined."

"Cecil will be back. He's very content here, and I doubt he'd leave the children. With a family to look after, he'll want to build a bigger nest. That means — "

"That means I'll have to find even more gold!" Tyasan wailed, burying his face in his hands.

"Griffins are proud creatures. He'll go out and get it himself. Lots and lots of it. Griffins know where to find gold. And if Eldry and Ashel ask him nicely — "

"He'd do anything for the children," Thrymm said.

" — I'm sure he'll bring back a barrel or two for them...."

Tyasan looked up. His expression was that of a man who had clutched at the last straw and caught the whole bale.

"...And their parents," Kedrigern concluded.

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Marc Laidlaw last appeared in our June 1994 issue with his horror story, "The Black Bus." He returns this time with a change of pace. "Dankden" is a fantasy which inspired our Bob Eggleton cover.

About the story, he writes, "It's an old-fashioned kind of story, influenced mainly by my longtime admiration of Jack Vance. I wrote a Gorlen novel (Mistress of Shadows) *in high school and destroyed it in college. I didn't think about Gorlen much for the next dozen years, and then one day I was sitting at my computer wondering what to write; I closed my eyes and there he was, walking down a drowning avenue...."*

Dankden

By Marc Laidlaw

HE WAS A CLUMSY BARD, inept at the complex fingerings that made eduldamer strings hum so sweetly in a master musician's hands. His musical deficiency owed much to the fact that his right hand was made entirely out of polished black stone, carved in perfect replication of a human hand, so detailed that one could see the slight reliefwork of veins and moles, the knolls of knuckles, even peeling cuticles captured in the hard glossy rock. Most of the fine hairs had snapped from the delicately rendered diamond-shaped pores, but you could feel where they had been, like adamantine stubble. His left hand was more dexterous than most, and his calloused fingers hammered the strings as best they could to make up for the other hand's disability; but his rock-solid right hand was good for nothing more than brutal strumming and whacking. He couldn't pinch a plectrum. The soundbox was scarred and showed the signs of much abuse, the thin wood having been patched many times over.

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"It's a gargoyle affliction," he said to most who asked. "Comes and goes. I'm looking for the treacherous slab who did it to me and disappeared before he could undo it."

If you asked why he didn't learn to play a different instrument in the meantime, one more suited to his handicap, the bard's face went hard and dark and stony as his hand. "Once I was proficient enough," he'd say. "The eduldamer spoiled me for anything else. It still suits my voice. And besides, what else could I play one-handed? What bard accompanies himself on sticks or spoons? I can't exactly sing while I blow ullala pipes...."

He was right about his voice. Though his stone thumb grated on the strings, his voice was strong. The conflict of these sounds — one harsh and scarcely in control, the other pure and deliberate — made the bard's performances more than merely bearable. Wherever he went, he was a curiosity. If asked why he didn't find a musical companion, one who could play an instrument while he sang accompaniment, the bard scoffed sadly. "I travel alone," he said. "I wouldn't wish my ill fortune on anyone else."

One gathered that this had not always been the case.

The name of this sulking, sarcastic, stone-fingered, honey-tongued loner was Gorlen Vizenfirth.

Gorlen stumbled into Dankden in a torrential rain, a phenomenon apparently so common in this climate that the mud-flooded streets of the mud-colored town were lined with patterned stepping stones of the sort usually found at stream crossings. Hand-pull rope-and-raft ferries operated at intersections, deep in the street canyons between the sagging, slouching shops and houses. Having spied an inn with a lamplit marquee across the street, during his customary search of the rooflines for anything resembling a gargoyle, Gorlen stepped onto the slimy planks of one such raft and began to pull himself against the muddy current. He had taken no more than three strong pulls — a lurching mode of progress made more difficult by the fact that he had but one hand to clench with — when he heard a cry from the sidewalk (or bank) he had just deserted. Turning, he saw a woman and a boy, both wrapped in shiny dark cloaks, only their white faces visible. The woman beckoned for him to return.

Something more than courtesy compelled him to obey: his one flesh palm was already blistering. At this rate, he would be unable to play the

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eduldamer by the time he reached the far row of stepping stones, and thus unable to earn a living. He stepped aside to let the pair aboard; the woman gave him a smile and her thanks. The rain and chill had brought a flush to her cheeks; her eyes were dark and gleaming, reflecting some source of light invisible to him in the gloomy afternoon. She looked too young to be the boy's mother, for which, seeing her beauty, he was suddenly glad.

As they crowded past him into a corner of the raft, Gorlen realized that he was expected to haul them. His spirits felt as sodden as his underwear, the strength drenched out of him, but making a show of it, he grasped the rope once more and yanked them out into the mudflow, turning his face into his dripping sleeve to hide the grimaces he made with every painful draw.

The short voyage must have gone more slowly than the Dankden woman was used to. Gorlen's palms were barely burning before he felt her beside him and saw her gloved hands reaching up to grasp the rope. The palms of her gloves were heavily reinforced, and with good reason. She pulled with such strong and practiced strokes that the rope was nearly torn from his hand. The raft scudded over the street in a dozen pulls, to which Gorlen made only a token contribution.

At the far bank, somewhat chastened, he tipped his hat, spilling a small flood of rainwater down his front, and thanked the woman. He caught her staring at his right hand; embarrassed, she looked away.

"What happened to your hand?" the boy said sharply.

The woman turned on him with a cry — "Jezzle! Please don't mind my brother, sir."

"That's all right," said Gorlen, offering his flesh hand to her as she stepped onto the stone landing. "Children always say what's in their minds. When do we lose that innocence, I wonder?"

"It's none of his business," she said, "that's all."

"I'll tell you, though," he said. "I got in trouble with the priests of Nardath a few years back. They laid a task on me — and one of their pet gargoyles turned my pinky to stone as a reminder. Every time I dawdled on my errand, or deliberately headed in the wrong direction, the blackness spread. Finger by finger, it swallowed my hand. As you can see, I was reluctant to do exactly as the priests asked, even at the cost of my dexterity."

The boy rapped on Gorlen's hand and jerked back smarting knuckles. "I guess you did what they wanted, or you'd be rock all over."

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"Lucky for you I did, too. In spite of myself, I saved the world. Some would even say, the universe."

Jezzle gazed at him coolly. "Wish I had one like that."

Gorlen smiled up at the woman, and was startled to see her expression. "You don't have to lie to him," she said as his grin died. "He's a child, not an idiot."

She seized the boy's hand and pulled him away before Gorlen could say another word, in his defense or otherwise.

That'll teach me, he thought as he watched them pick their way over the stones. *Hauling out my heroic credentials to impress a lady. Of course she considers me a fool. Who wouldn't!*

I'm going to start saying it's artificial.

Letting the pair precede him some distance into the murk, he finally followed in the same direction until he reached the inn he'd spotted from across the street.

The place was called the Drydock. Tilted signs, hand-lettered in bright orange paint and nailed to the facade, proclaimed the merits of the inn: *"Come in & dry off!" "A snug harbor!" "Completely dry inside!" "Boot-warmers available!" "Heat in every room!" "Dry beds & sheets!" "Your comfort cheerfully guaranteed!"* A huge stone hearth was pictured on the wall; he could almost feel the heat of the painted flames.

Gorlen grinned and pushed open the door, expecting gusts of warm air. He was met instead by a clammy draft reeking of mildew. He couldn't be sure whether it was his soaked boots or the spongy mass of carpet that squelched underfoot as he stepped into a grotto dim and dank as a frog's den. Scattered lamps glowed with a weak, watery light, their chimneys all rippled with droplets. The interior echoed with a steady streaming drizzle; louder than the muffled sizzle of the rain, it was the sound of countless leaks, of water pouring into tin pails and teetering saucers. Makeshift gutters lined the walls, carrying run-off to a row of windows at the rear of the high-roofed room. Tiny cataracts cascaded from the ceiling, vanishing through holes they had worn in the floor. Spray from the myriad fountains peppered his face and hands. Mossy stairs rose on either side to an opposing pair of lofts; above were rows of open doors, all so badly warped that probably they would never close again.

Across the room, behind a countertop, cloaked in the bright yellow skin of some no doubt toxic local amphibian, stood a man whom it would have

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been charitable (and an insult to toads) to dub "toadlike." Gray-cheeked, with bulging eyes in a lumpy face, he patiently mopped his countertop with alternate strokes of a rubber knife and a sponge. Water flew to the floor in sheets; he wrung the sponge into a bucket. The counter was instantly soaked again, and the bucket would soon need emptying. He interrupted this futile procedure for a moment when Gorlen entered, then went back to it.

Gorlen should have left immediately; there was no real point in staying or stoking the bartender's immediate, obvious hostility. But the blatant fraud, the howling misrepresentations of the lurid signs outside, spurred both his indignation and his sense of the absurd. He found the combination irresistible.

Striding across the soft planks, he called on the yellow-clad proprietor: "You, there! Sir — if I may call you that? What is the meaning of your bold and boldly false inducements? I have never seen such a bare-faced bait and switch, which fools an eager customer for perhaps one hundredth of a second, and gains you nothing but their ill will in record time."

The innkeeper, if such he was, looked sidelong at a collection of mushroom growths clustered at the far end of the counter, gray puffs rising on rust-colored stalks. Gorlen saw suddenly that they were customers, several blobby souls wrapped in wrinkled gray mold-colored cloaks, hunched on spindly iron stools and sipping liquor from tall glasses which they guarded with cupped hands from the more unpredictable leaks. Gorlen sensed that they had heard such objections before; although they made no sound, from the quivering of their oddly similar bulks he felt certain they were laughing.

"We're under new management," the toad-man croaked, and at that the laughter rang outright. "I can't be held responsible for the claims of the previous owner."

"Very good," Gorlen said, joining with them in laughter. "I see the merit of your argument. But what would you say if I were to bring your claims more in line with reality?"

"What d'ye mean by that?"

"I mean I would happily volunteer to remove the signs from your establishment, which surely serve only to bring unhappy and deluded customers through your door. The name itself, of course, must remain. I'm sure you paid plenty of auris for its ironic properties alone, which I cannot help but admire."

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"Take down my signs?" the keeper said, glowering at his customers to shut them up.

"I thought you said they were the previous owner's signs, and not yours at all."

"I paid for 'em, that makes 'em mine."

"Then I'll bring them straight in, out of harm's way, and even suggest a few places where you might put them." Gorlen turned and walked out the way he had come in. The saturated air, which had seemed oppressive before, now tasted fresh and invigorating; at least it was not thick with mold spores striving to establish green colonies in his nasal passages. On the porch outside the Drydock, he wrenched at the nearest of the ludicrous signs, finding that the swollen wood splintered and crumbled in his hands. He set what remained of it carefully beside the door, and was starting on a second when, in a flash of slick yellow, the innkeeper sprang upon him.

Gorlen had only an instant to brace himself; it was not enough. Broad fat hands grabbed and shoved him, first onto his butt and then across the scummy planks. He'd been carrying his eduldamer case slung over one shoulder, and he felt its strap catch on a porch post, along with his travelsack. He wished heartily that he could have stayed there with them, but the upright toad had given him a good push, and did not neglect to follow through. Gorlen hit the edge of the porch and awkwardly tumbled between the stepping stones, sprawling into the muddy stream. Thrashing for purchase, he began to sink.

He kicked out, his eyes full of mud, mud in his mouth, and no bottom beneath him. This was no street — it was a river!

Once he had been as fine a swimmer as he'd been a musician. The gargoyle had robbed him of both skills with one move. Nor had he ever swum in such a rich mixture of mud, which did nothing to buoy him up like friendly water. It was a miracle that he managed to stay afloat for more than a few seconds in the current; a miracle, also, that guided him toward another of the raft landings, where even now someone was moving out across the flooded street and shouting at him — words he couldn't hear through the mud in his ears — as they tried to pull the raft into his path.

He hit it hard and blind, throwing his arms over the deck, clambering aboard with assistance from his rescuer. He sprawled as if dead, then struggled to his knees, choking into the face of a woman.

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"Well, well, if it isn't the savior of the universe," said his rescuer blithely, hauling the raft back toward the stone landing where her brother Jezzle waited.

"At your service," Gorlen replied, and promptly vomited copious quantities of dilute brown gritty muck at her feet.

HER NAME was Taian. She and Jezzle lived with their father, an amphibian hunter and dealer in phib hides, in a set of small but thoroughly dry rooms at the top of a high-peaked house where the rain rang loud on every slanted ceiling, but leaked through nowhere. Phib skins hung drying in almost every room, which made an already cramped apartment feel impossibly crowded. From where Gorlen sat by the fire, nursing a mug of warm fermented plapioc, he could not make out all of Taian or Jezzle, though both sat near him in the parlor. They appeared only as fragments between the dangling curled hides. Accustomed now to the warm, somewhat swampy odor of the place, he was content to fill himself with the thick sweet white liquid and listen to the other two talk while his clothes — freshly soaped and rinsed in rain — dried on a rack by the fire.

Metal clattered in the hall; the door slammed and boots came stomping. Jezzle jumped up to greet his father, a tall, broad-shouldered, bearded man who stopped in the parlor doorway and went quite silent and suspicious when he saw Gorlen, dressed only in blankets, reclining in what must have been his own favorite chair.

Gorlen jumped hastily to his feet, but Taian was already explaining. The hunter burst out laughing, and came forward to clap him on the shoulder. "So, young man! Five minutes in Dankden and you've already made an implacable enemy! Old Stoag and his cronies will be tracking you down, you've my word on it, now that you've impugned the comforts of his inn."

Gorlen wasn't completely sure the man was joking, although his smile was wide enough. He must have seen Gorlen's uncertainty, though.

"Ah, relax. That place will collapse under its own soggy weight soon enough, and carry Stoag back into the mire where he belongs. They keep those signs up for a laugh, to watch the faces on any stranger who comes in. You threatened to get between a phib and his amusement, that's why he pitched you into the tide-flood."

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"A phib?" Gorlen said. "So he's not completely human, then?"

"Not by half, no; nor his customers. They crawl up from the swamps at high tide and try to lay claim to Dankden once more, with their usual pewling complaints that the town is rightfully theirs. A hopeless bunch, and utterly useless — except for the good skins of their purebreed brethren. Ha!"

And here he thrust at Gorlen a fresh phib skin, still limp and wet with ichor, smelling far fishier than the dried hides hanging throughout the apartment. It was grayish green in color; there were others in similarly muted tones slung over the hunter's shoulder. He slipped them all off and handed them to Taian, who carried the hides down the hall.

"Take good care of them, girl," he called after her. "That's the best lot I've hauled in an age."

He looked toward the chair with scarcely disguised longing, and Gorlen leapt out of the way. "By all means, sit!"

"Ah, well, if you don't mind..." He sank down on the chair, groaning with relief, and pulled off his sopping boots. These and the rest of his clothes were quickly mounted before the fire; then he wrapped himself in a thick robe that had been warming on a hook beside the hearth. Jezzle appeared with a large goblet of plapioc. The big man sucked it down in a few swallows, then handed it back to the boy, wiping curds from his mustache. "Another like that one," he said with a laugh. Then he put out his hand to Gorlen. "I'm Clabbus."

"Pleased, sir. Gorlen Vizenfirth is the name."

Gorlen put out his right hand. Clabbus showed a moment's surprise, then a lingering curiosity. "Eh?" he said, touching it and then letting go. "Mind if I have a closer look?"

"Not at all," said Gorlen.

Clabbus hunched toward the fire, and Gorlen turned the hand palm up, palm down, letting the old man inspect the perfectly rendered patterns. "Fate lines," he said after awhile. "I don't read them, but these look strangely symmetrical. You carved them yourself, I suppose?"

"In fact," said Gorlen, "those are the very lines I was born with. And you're not the first to notice their symmetry. Some say they herald great luck, others an evil destiny. So far both prophecies have proved equally true. Half the time good luck delivers me from some dreadful end into a pleasant one, much as your daughter rescued me today; the rest of the time, I seem pitched

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from relative comfort into darker adventures. Safe decisions lead me into awful trouble, and only the riskiest endeavors ever seem to deliver me to anything like a moment's peace."

"Peace?" said Clabbus. "Most of us are too busy making a living. I notice your instrument case....?"

"That is my living."

"Is it a good one?"

"Well, I have no house — "

"This shabby flat is rented, my boy! What do I own?"

" — and no family."

"Ah. Well." Clabbus blinked sadly, in sympathy.

"And what friends I've made are scattered far and wide; some of them no doubt rue the day that brought me into their lives, and celebrate the day that carried me off again."

"Surely that won't be the case with us. Jezzle, another plap' for Gorlen Vizenfirth as well!"

The boy had anticipated his father's request. For a time they sat sipping together by the fire. Jezzle brought a tray of spiced meat and pickles for his father, then sat by the chair and asked about the day's hunt. As Clabbus described events in the swampy reaches outside Dankden, Gorlen found his mind wandering to Taian, whom he could hear humming down the hall. He pulled on his warm, dry clothes and followed the sound of her voice until he reached a closed door; he rapped lightly and passed through.

He found himself standing on a covered balcony, above the rushing street. He habitually checked the rooftops across the way, some taller than this one, all of them lacking any but the commonest masonry and decorative plasters. There was nothing like a gargoyle anywhere in sight.

A huge stove burned in one corner of the balcony, smoke fuming from a perforated pipe that curled from the chimney. Taian was trimming the hides and hanging them in the gouts of smoke, which then escaped around the edges of the eaves. A heap of slimy globular vegetables filled a half-keg in the corner, and every now and then Taian reached over, plucked one up, and tossed it into the stove, where it exploded wetly, releasing a strong perfume that altered the color and consistency of the smoke for nearly a minute.

"Essential to curing the hides," she explained. "Otherwise they crack and crumble and smell terrible. They won't repel water for long, either."

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"Fine rainwear your family makes," Gorlen said. "I wish I had such a cloak myself. My common clothes are soaked right through in a strong shower."

"Well," she said coyly, "perhaps something could be arranged."

"I don't wish to take advantage," he said, moving closer to her on the balcony.

"No more than you already have, you mean?" she said, whirling away from him to gather another batch of skins.

"Is this your livelihood?" he asked, letting his hands fall.

"For the moment. Curing hides, stitching cloaks, and looking after my brother. I wanted to be a hunter like my father, but until Jezzle's old enough to care for himself...I'm stuck here. Father used to take me with him into the marshes, to watch the boat and help keep the lines clear while he dived; but since our mother died, I've had to stay home. With my luck, it will be Jezzle who ends up the hunter; I'll have spent my youth and strength on domestic chores."

"I doubt that," Gorlen said. "You're young and strong enough to be a hunter when the time comes."

"You think so?"

"Well," he said, smiling, "when I remember how swiftly you got the raft to me this afternoon, and hauled me aboard—I think you could do anything you like. And Jezzle looks like a fast-growing lad. He'll be ready for the swamps before you know it."

"I hope you're right. But really you know nothing of our way of life. You're only guessing." She leaned against the balcony rail, gazing up at him, a wistful look in her eyes.

"At the particulars, yes," he said. "But I've traveled so widely that I think mine is an educated guess." He put his left hand on the rail beside her, leaning closer. She was warm from the stove; he was close enough to feel that much.

"Are you an educated man, then?"

"Only in the ways of the world," he said.

Her eyes closed. Now he could kiss her.

At that moment, shouts rose from the street—a chorus of gravelly voices that sounded as rough as the rain. Gorlen was inclined to think it a random rabble, nothing to interrupt his pursuit of Taian's lips. But her eyes leapt open and she spun away with an angry cry: "No! Not again!"

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She pushed through the door, calling for her father, leaving Gorlen nearly tipping over the railings into the rain. Saving himself from a headlong fall into sloshing streets, he stared down at a multicolored mob that had gathered on the landings and stepping stones across the street from Clabbus's high house. He couldn't quite hear what they were calling, nor could he imagine why they were directing their energies at this particular balcony. Like Stoag and his ungainly customers, these were lumpy and misshapen folk, albeit many were brightly colored in orange and yellow and vivid green. Gorlen realized with some surprise that these brilliant vestments were their own skins.

Clabbus appeared at his side. "Where are they — oh! Leave off pestering my family!" he hollered down at the crowd.

"What about our families?" one called back — though it was hard to tell which.

"Mine's an honest living, on land that's rightly ours!"

"Rightly yours? You come into our very dens — trapping and killing!"

"Bah, nonsense! Go or I'll have the guards here in a moment!" He turned to the door, where Taian stood glaring at her father for no reason Gorlen understood. Jezzle tried to peer out past her, but Clabbus pushed them both back inside.

"What do they want now?" Taian asked.

"Never you mind. Let's go in, Gorlen. This will take care of itself."

From the back of the crowd, hidden till that moment by an overhanging eave, came a wailing woman, carrying in her arms a large bundle. In the dripping rain and evening murk, Gorlen could hardly see what it was, although she lifted it up for their inspection. "Look what you've done!" she cried. "In what way is this rightful?"

She slipped on the stones and went down weakly, dropping her bundle. As it flopped to the hard surface, it sprawled out in full form. Gorlen saw a raw, oozing figure, about the size of a child, but mottled and marbled with streaks of gray and blue and yellow. Gorlen heard Taian gasp; she had come up next to him at the rail.

"I know not what you mean," Clabbus called, "nor do I care to see another rotting phib carcass after the day I've had."

The woman was unable to answer; her neighbors helped her to her feet, and rescued her bundle. One of them turned his face up to the balcony.

"Another carcass? This was her only child."

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"Father!" Taian said.

Clabbus turned quickly and grabbed his daughter's arm, pushing her toward the door. Jezzle jumped back as they rushed through it. "Liars," he said. "That's a common phib. If it's mine at all, I caught it in the swamps. They're trying to start a riot, that's all."

"You rob our very clutches!" came a cry behind them, cut off as Clabbus slammed the door.

"I've had enough of them," Clabbus swore as he stormed down the hall, urging his children ahead of him. "Every week they're noisier, more insistent. As if things haven't been hard on everyone."

"Far harder on the phibs," Taian said, pushing aside hides as they returned to the parlor.

Clabbus dropped down in his chair and swept his thumb across his dinner plate to wipe up the last bits of grease. "True enough. The hunting's nothing like it used to be out there in the swamps, not like when I was a boy. All Dankden is hurting. Those halfbreeds blame their hardship on us hunters, when we're the only ones who ever brought a damn thing to this sodden place."

"There was nothing here before we came," said Jezzle sternly, echoing his father's tone. "Nothing but swamps and marsh and knuckleroot trees, and dumb phibs everywhere."

"Don't speak badly of the phibs, boy. They're your only honest living."

"But pa, what they call us in the streets — "

"That's the halfbreeds — it's the human in them saying that. A phib is but an animal, neither good nor evil apart from the quality of its skin. And everything you have you owe to their hides."

This settled, Clabbus sat himself down and crossed his hands, scowling into the fire. Taian and Jezzle retreated, and Gorlen thought it best to follow. "Well, that's another evening spoiled," Taian said as they went into the kitchen.

"I'm going to look and see if they're still in the street," Jezzle said mischievously.

"Don't make things worse," Taian warned him. "Father wouldn't like it."

"He'll never know. Someone needs to keep an eye on them, make sure they don't try setting fire to the house or something wicked like that."

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"Watch them from the balcony if you must," she said. "But don't go near them — especially not now!"

When the boy was gone, Gorlen watched Taian cleaning up the dinner plates, rinsing them under a stream of water that ran through pipes from the roof.

"What brought you to Dankden?" she asked.

"I'm looking for a gargoyle," he said, nervously stroking his stone hand. "Where does your father hunt?"

"Far out in the marshes. The phibs make their homes in underwater caves beneath the knuckleroots. It's dirty, dangerous work — diving in the mud flows, feeling your way to an entrance, then climbing up inside to face them down in their own dens."

"And are they savage fighters?"

She shrugged. "As to that, you will have to ask my father to show you his burn-scars. The slightest touch of their skin is enough to sear holes in human flesh. My father has writhed for weeks, in agony from an amphibian's caustic hug."

"And yet you wear these skins with no discomfort. How is that?"

"Only the strong, mature phibs manifest the poison coat. Those bright colors you sometimes see in halfbreeds are about all they retain from their full phib ancestors. We stay away from mature hides — they're worthless for the trade. Only immature or senile hides are really suitable. It takes several years for a phib to come into full poison, and toward the end of their life, well — I guess nature no longer cares whether they survive."

"So in other words, the ones you hunt are defenseless."

"You wouldn't say that were you to come up in one of their dens in full darkness, not knowing where you stood or how many surrounded you, or the color of those that waited...."

Gorlen shuddered. "It must take a brave hunter."

"Yes, especially now that the phibs are so few. Once the swamps were hopping with them. Now the ones that remain are more clever than ever, and must be tracked diligently, often deep into the knuckleroot groves. My father has been weeks on the trail of the hides he brought home today."

"Must be quite an art to it."

"And a science, yes. Now excuse me — I can't leave the new hides hanging outside any longer."

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"I'll come with you," Gorlen said. "In case the mob is there."

The rain had let up when they emerged. The cloud cover was full of ragged holes through which starshine and the glow of the deep blue sky bled down on the black-running streets. There was no sound except the isolated drip-drop of things drying out, and the steady wash of the current. That, and Clabbus snoring in the parlor. Gorlen looked over the railing and was astonished to find that the gathering across the way had grown in size, though not in volume. In the clearing night, the vigil was eerily still. The halfbreed phibs crouched down to watch the house — this very balcony. While Gorlen spied upon them, a little candle sprang to life and was used to light a second wick; each of this pair touched two more, and the starry flames spread until there were dozens down there, and that many again flickering on the turbulent face of the watercourse.

Gorlen saw a shadow pass across the reflected flames, towing ripples behind it. It was a very small boat, unlit, with one small figure paddling. It glided near the edge of the gathering, and suddenly he heard a voice he knew — "Phibby vermin! Stay in your dens!" At the same time, the rower flung something wet into the crowd. With the splatter, numerous flames were extinguished, and many voices began to swear and shout.

"I hope I'm wrong," Gorlen said to Taian, who was gathering the smoky cloaks, "but isn't that Jezzle down there?"

Taian gasped and flung herself to the rail. "No!"

The waterway was suddenly boiling around the small craft, as mourners dropped their candles and leapt into the street. New cries joined the curses — the shrieks of a boy in trouble. The boat rocked and tipped, rolling completely over and up again. Jezzle coughed out a bubbling yell, but his boat rolled again, silencing him. This time when it righted itself, the compartment was empty. Gorlen saw the paddle sucked away, spinning slowly down the street.

"Jezzle!" Taian screamed.

She ran back into the hall and crashed into Clabbus who was coming up from shallow sleep. He grabbed her by the shoulders — "What is it? Where is he?"

"In the street," she answered. "They're drowning him!"

Father and daughter, utterly familiar with the stairs leading from their flat, left Gorlen behind; he picked his way cautiously down through mold-smelling dark, clinging to the smooth stairrails with his flesh hand. By the

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time he reached the street, the commotion had spread to both sides of the avenue. The candles across the way were scattered and far fewer; those who carried them stood uncertainly at the water's edge, outnumbered by many clearly human shapes, rushing back and forth. Lamps were lit and hoisted on poles above the water, and swept back and forth to light the surging street. One lamp lit a phib-skin coracle sculling about in the middle of the avenue. In it, Clabbus stood shouting while Taian paddled and poled, moving swiftly here and there. Finally their boat touched the far bank, and Clabbus leapt out. Of what ensued, Gorlen could make out only the very tips of raggedly shouted sentences. Several other boats were quickly dispatched downstream; people ran from stone to stone, calling and casting their lights over the water. It had all happened so quickly....

Gorlen could find no place for himself in all this. He noticed that those of amphibian ancestry soon vanished completely, which seemed wise now that the decks around Clabbus's building were crowded with a collection of strong, scabby characters dressed almost exclusively in heavy-duty phibwear. From the crinkled burnmarks on their faces and arms, which they wore like the emblem of their guild, he guessed these were hide hunters, Clabbus's peers. They seemed to speak a secret language, and more than one eyed him suspiciously where he leaned against a post in a shaded corner. It was not until Taian and Clabbus returned in the coracle, towing the boy's empty craft behind them, that they raised their voices.

The hunter looked shaken and weary — aged by years in the space of an hour. As he stepped onto the bank, supported by a white-faced, grim-mouthed Taian, the other hunters surrounded him. Gorlen heard them offer both sympathy and the promise of vengeance. Neither evoked any response from Clabbus. Taian led him to a bench against the wall, seated him, and turned to look back blankly at the water.

"What can I do, Taian?" Gorlen asked.

It took a long time for her eyes to focus on him. "Nothing. There's nothing anyone can do."

Someone, at that instant, brushed up behind Gorlen from the dark edge of the river — someone dripping wet, yet burning. Gorlen pulled his arm away with a hiss, the skin searing, and turned to see a face of incredible virulence passing him, pushing into lamplight. It was more phib than man, by far: orange mottling on a blue face, vivid streaks and yellow stripes with points

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of inky, glistening blackness. Every hunter stared at the phib, and he saw on their faces everything from terror and rage to frustrated lust. No doubt they wished they could have harvested and worn the bright mature colors. The creature stopped before Clabbus and stood looking down at him from a proud height. When it spoke, its words were clear human speech, though somewhat frothy with mucus or mud.

"If you want your boy," it said, "you must come to the place where you murdered my own."

Clabbus leapt to his feet. "I take my hides from the swamp!"

The phib put out one lethal hand, held it inches from Clabbus's mouth. The hunter did not shrink away, but he kept his silence.

"Your son is not in the swamp," the creature said. "I repeat, you will find him where you took your last haul."

Clabbus and the phib stared eye to eye for several seconds, and then the phib turned and strode toward the street. At the edge of the deck, he leapt; the mud swallowed him.

"Oh, Destroyer," Clabbus swore. "What now? The phib's insane. The whole damned race of them —

"But Father, Jezzle's alive!" Taian's face was bright again. "Somewhere, they have him!"

"Yes, girl, yes, yes — but he could be anywhere."

The other hunters, tearing their eyes from the mud, moved closer to where Clabbus and Taian stood. They were full of advice. "It's a trap!" "They'll lure you into the swamp!" "I know that phib — let me hunt him down!"

"It makes no sense," Clabbus said. "None at all."

"Father," Taian whispered. But he ignored her, swallowed up by his associates, each of them presenting a plan. She moved toward Gorlen. "Let's get him inside — this is not what he needs."

Gorlen took one of Clabbus's arms and Taian took the other. "Good people," Gorlen said, "fine hunters, I am sure Clabbus appreciates all your wisdom and warnings." He and Taian began to draw her father toward the door. "And he will no doubt call on all your talents to assist him when a course of action has been decided. But for the moment, please, leave a father to his grief. I thank you."

With that, they drew him backward through the door into the building;

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Gorlen slammed it quickly, cutting off the expected quizzical cries of, "Who the hell are you?"

The landlord stood in the hall, eager to keep all others out. He latched the door and Taian thanked him. They headed toward the stairs.

"Insane," Clabbus kept saying. "He's dooming my son through his madness — my son! I did nothing to him! He's not a pure phib! He's not what I hunt!"

"Father," Taian said, "please be quiet and listen. Listen to me now, and you'll hear what you know to be true, though I have never yet heard you admit it. But tonight you *will* admit it — or else lose your son. Father?"

"I'm listening," he growled. They had reached their landing, and re-entered the apartments through the open door. It was cold in the house, for a wind blew down the hall from the balcony. Drying hides fluttered and the smoke of the curing stove curled in the corners. Gorlen went to close the balcony door. Returning to the parlor, he found Taian stroking her father's hair, kneeling before him while he sat in his chair by the fire.

"You know it is true," she said.

"I know no such thing. Those are rumors the halfbreeds spread to cause riots and discontent. They want only chaos and bloodshed and the wreck of Dankden."

"Father, I'm telling you, friends of mine have witnessed certain hunters at this evil work — men you know, men you grew up with, men you call your brothers. That's why you refuse to face the truth."

"Lies!"

"Don't be so stubborn! I've tried to open your eyes, but..."

"They're right! It's a trap! If I were to go where that phib implies, it would only be a trap!"

"Maybe they want you to see with your own eyes, father. See what some of us have known for years now."

"I won't hear it," he said.

She rose in a fury and turned to Gorlen. "He will hear it. He's heard it before. There are hunters he knows quite well, men I once called uncle, men who disgrace their calling — who mock the art and science of it alike. Men too lazy or ignorant to track the phibs in the swamps, or trap them in their dens. Since the phibs have thinned away, and the living has become a hard

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one, there are men spoiled by so many fat years in Dankden that they no longer bother to venture into the knuckleroot groves."

"Don't listen to my daughter," Clabbus said, but his heart was not in his voice. "It's madness."

She lowered her voice, clenching tight to Gorlen's black hand. "Yes, it is madness. These men hunt in Dankden, Gorlen. In the slums, the poor dens at the edge of town, in the grottos where the young and senile are often left to fend for themselves. These so-called hunters prey on the halfbreeds. Half human! Our kin!"

"No, no, nooooo," Clabbus said, as if he were weary of denying it.

"Father, you know it is so. What of the body we saw tonight? The very mother who bore that child carried the evidence here for you to see. She was no purebreed phib."

"But I didn't slay that child!" her father said with a racking sob.

Taian only stared at him and did not answer. When he slumped, face in his hands, she glanced sidelong at Gorlen. He moved out of the parlor, and a moment later she followed, shutting the door behind her.

"He must admit to himself what he's long suspected," she whispered. "But he's begun to do it, and I'm proud. Now he will do what needs to be done." She clenched Gorlen's hand. "Jezzle will be returned to us."

"I wish there was something I could do," he said. "As a stranger here, I — "

"As a stranger, you make me see Dankden through your eyes. There's a sickness here which must be cured before it kills us all."

"Whatever you may need me for, please, rely on me," he said.

She started to take his hands, both of them, but at that moment they heard a groan from beyond the door. It opened and Clabbus appeared, all weakness banished from his eyes.

"All right," he said. "I'll talk to them. I'll make them take me where they went today."

"I know this is hard for you," Taian said.

"No...no, it is suddenly very easy. The fact that none of them has come to me, none has offered to take me to the place...they are disgusting to me now. They know where my boy is hidden, but they say nothing, more concerned with protecting their pathetic and illegal trade. I will find it very easy to convince them now."

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He stalked past them down the hall, and Taian turned to look at Gorlen, her eyes flashing with pride. "You see?"

"Come along!" Clabbus called. "Your brother's waiting!"

Taian threw her arms around Gorlen, and then released him, running. Once again he was left to find his own way down the stairs.

CROUCHING LOW in the sloshing dark at the back of the boat, Gorlen wished for a phib skin of his own. It had begun to rain again — and not a light rain, but a torrent. His boots were full, and where he knelt in half a foot of water, he might as well have been swimming alongside the boat. Meanwhile, Taian, likewise crouched, poled them expertly down watery lanes of increasingly decrepit buildings, rotten sagging piles of swollen wood in corners of which the dimmest lights burned with a sodden, sullen glow. Figures huddled near the flames, wide-mouthed, their flesh streaked gray and blue and sometimes violent red. It was hard for him to believe anyone could live here. Though few other boats navigated the swirling streets, he sometimes saw rounded objects breaking the surface, blowing bubbles, sinking again. Swimmers, he realized. Boats, here, would be a luxury, and unnecessary for personal transport.

But there were two boats ahead of them, almost always lost from view in the shifting rain. Weak lanterns hung above the streets, tossed by the wind, most of them already doused or burned out; they squeaked and rattled on their rusted brackets. Taian's eyes were sharper than his, he supposed, for after they'd drifted and dodged through a series of abrupt turns, the curtains of water might part for a moment and he'd see the ones they followed. The hunters still didn't suspect their presence.

"Stay here until I return," Clabbus had told her as he climbed into his own boat on the dock outside the Phibby Inn. And nodding to Gorlen he'd added, "You make sure she does."

In the other boat were two men Clabbus had pulled almost bodily from the inn, hide hunters with sour faces, who had sneered but finally acceded to his threats. Gorlen and Taian had stood at his shoulder among the crowded tables of the inn. All the hunters gathered there to drink hot plapioc must have known why Clabbus had come, but these two had been the least pleased of all to see him.

Taian and Gorlen had watched them scull ahead, guiding Clabbus's boat

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away from the inn. The moment they cut round a corner, she'd leapt down into a docked boat and signaled him to follow.

"I don't trust him with them!" she said. "Are you coming?"

Gorlen gave an instant's thought to the owner of the boat she was untying, but figured that she knew the customs of Dankden far better than he. He jumped in beside her, losing his balance as she shoved away from the dock and toppling into the bottom of the boat; there he stayed, for the most part, while she tracked the hunters.

Gorlen peered up at the roofs passing by, at the dripping eaves and tottering ledges. A bit of polished stonework would have stood out like an entire golden palace; this was no place for a roving gargoyle to hide. Thus his visit to Dankden advanced his larger mission nothing; but it didn't trouble Gorlen that he had delayed his search for the sake of another. At least the dark stoniness of his hand was not spreading; in fact, although he couldn't be completely certain, he imagined that it had receded slightly, leaving a bit more flesh around his wristbones. This gave him some solace, but he was pleased to remain with the beautiful Taian in any case. She was strong and proud, and much to his liking. He stroked his stone hand with cold fingers of flesh, wondering if he might reduce the blackness still further tonight — until nothing remained but the tip of one finger. How many times had he reduced the gargoyle's affliction to one or two digits, and then, in a moment of recklessness, of greed or indulgence at the expense of another, felt the cold creep up in an instant and claim his hand again, threatening to swallow his forearm? He was not a true gargoyle; he could not survive as a being of pure stone. If ever the blackness touched his heart, he would die in an instant. Until he found the mineral beast who had thus cursed him, he must take care at every step to consider his motives, and never give in to so many of the whims that every other man obeyed without consequence. It would have been one thing if the stone were directly linked to his own true heart, his conscience, his soul — whatever one might call it. He would then have had a truer guide to his actions; he would have known in advance that he was disobeying his deepest nature. But the blackness was a gargoyle's flesh, and responded in a gargoyle fashion to his acts. While generally the gargoyle conscience overlapped with his own, it was ultimately alien, unpredictable, unfathomable. Deeds he considered worthy might earn him another inch or two of blackness, while an act any human might have ruled treacherous would cause the blackness to recede.

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He felt that in helping Taian he helped himself, and so far his stony hand had not hinted otherwise. If he could play a large enough role in freeing Jezzle, perhaps his fingers would freely wriggle again — he might actually pluck the eduldamer for her pleasure tonight, instead of strumming it so brutally! He might stroke Taian's cheek with skin as soft as hers, instead of icy adamant.

Suddenly the boat darted sideways into an alley. Taian grabbed the corner of a slimy wall and clung to it, peering back into the street. Gorlen crept up beside her. In the ever narrower streets the wind was largely cut off, except at certain intersections where it whirled the rain about as in a hurricane. He could see, not far off, both boats drifting. Clabbus brought his coracle closer to the hunter's boat, and one of them stepped in beside him. They appeared to be pointing at one of the buildings just ahead. The man alone in the hunter's boat looked slowly around, until he was about to look directly at Taian and Gorlen. She pulled on his sleeve, and they ducked back out of sight.

"This must be the spot," she whispered. "Unless the halfbreeds come to meet them, they'll have to dive. I should have gone with my father — should have insisted. If he goes down, he leaves his boat in their care. They've already proven they can't be trusted."

"Perhaps we should announce ourselves, then," Gorlen said.

"He would be furious if he knew we'd followed!"

"If it would free him to dive, it might be worth the risk. I don't trust those two, either."

Taian put a finger to her lips, then slowly peered around the wall again. Almost immediately she ducked back.

"They're coming! Quick!"

She snatched up the pole and shoved them farther into the alley, deep into the dark, lapping recesses. A moment later, the hunter's boat shot past, one man poling, the other looking back. Both were laughing. Gorlen waited for Clabbus to follow, but the men's laughter faded away, and still there was no sign of Taian's father.

The same thought must have come to them both at the same time, for even as Gorlen jumped to his feet, Taian pushed the boat forward. Once again he lost his balance and toppled — this time overboard.

He surfaced, choking, to see Taian looking down the avenue in confusion. Paddling, he followed her eyes and saw Clabbus's boat floating empty

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in the middle of an intersection. Without a moment's indecision, she launched herself toward it. Gorlen graciously called, "Go ahead!"

His own progress in the stagnant streets, with one hand so heavy, was maddeningly slow. Nor did he wish to abandon his boots, though they slowed him still further. It was with some surprise, then, that after kicking along in Taian's wake, he paused for a moment's breathing space and let his feet sink — and so touched bottom.

He stood on solid, if mucky, ground; the watercourse was no more than five feet deep; his mouth was just above water. Standing, he called to Taian, who now stared frantically into her father's coracle: "It's shallow!"

Taian wheeled around in her boat, looking at the dark decayed buildings as if they could tell her something. She cupped her hands to her mouth. "Father!" she cried. "Father!"

Gorlen too began to call: "Clabbus!"

But there was no answer, and no sign of the big man swimming. Surely even a trained diver could not have stayed under for so long.

"Clabbus!" he called again.

And at that instant, he became aware of countless wet faces watching them from the buildings all around, peering out of drowned doorways, out of water-filled rooms, looking down from the dripping frames of unrecognizable piles that might once have been cathedrals just as easily as warehouses.

There was a loud in-drawing of breath, an immense choking cough from somewhere inside those ruined structures.

"Father!" Taian cried.

"So that's who you are," said a voice, sounding near though Gorlen could not see its source. The deep-throated coughing went on and on; and it did indeed sound like Clabbus. "Playing games, all of you, trying to sneak in by some roundabout way? This isn't where we said to come."

"Please," Taian called. Gorlen edged slowly toward her boat. "It's not him you want — he keeps to the swamps, he's proud of his skills, he respects you and your people! We only want his son — my brother."

"There's plenty parents here who want their children back, sibs too," the voice said, low and harsh.

"We didn't harm them! The two who lured him here — they and their kind did that!"

"While you looked the other way? What is it with humans? Why should

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we think it any kinder of you to hunt the pure amphibians, our swampland cousins? Why don't you go hunt apes instead?"

"There are those who do," Taian answered, her voice sinking almost to inaudibility. Gorlen heard it because he now stood beside the boat, his left hand on its rim. He had no clear impression of who addressed them, or where the speaker stood. None of the phib faces he saw seemed to be moving; they all stared impassively, yet full of unmistakable hate.

"Excuse me," Gorlen said loudly, though it was his least wish to draw all that amphibian attention to himself. "Perhaps, as a stranger in Dankden, a more impartial party here, I can be of some service to both sides."

"Impartial?" said the sneering voice. "What human is impartial? You travel with hunters, the very ones who slay our children and our elders, the ones who rob our clutches to cure our flayed hides."

"Fortune alone brought me into the gracious presence of Clabbus and his children; I might as easily have ended up among your folk, had I come into Dankden from the swampy edge of town. Nor am I completely human; I am, like you, a halfbreed."

There were cries of disbelief from many gray-tongued mouths. Gorlen raised his right hand to silence them.

"My father was a gargoyle!" he cried. "I have all my life observed human affairs as an alien, an outcast. Only the kindest humans have welcomed me into their homes, as Clabbus has. I would speak for him and his children."

"They are part of the corruption here! What hunter is not?"

"I cannot answer that, nor can I argue politics all night. I suggest some action be taken — some solution sought."

Clabbus suddenly let out a groan. "Those hunters tried to drown me here, and make it look like your work," came his muffled voice. "What other evidence do you need that I am their enemy?"

"That does not make you our friend."

"I only wish...for all of us...peace. That we may live together. I swear I'll do my part to stop the illegal traffic in halfbreed hides. I am not without some influence in Dankden."

"That is so," the speaker replied. "Why do you think we were so pleased to have your son delivered to us?"

Gorlen stepped away from the boat, his black hand in the air, mud sucking his boots from his feet. Well, let them go. He felt more agile barefoot,

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and he had the feeling he was going to be in liquid for awhile.

"Take me," he said. "Let me visit the boy. Let Clabbus and his daughter, who are more familiar with the workings of the hide trade in Dankden, go back among their people and confront your murderers. I will be your hostage, with Clabbus's son."

He caught Taian staring at him; he could not read her face, but he could feel something happening to his hand...a spreading tingle where before he had felt nothing.

Not now! he thought.

He quickly shoved his hand beneath the water, aware that some discussion was going on in the ruins around him. Clabbus's voice was part of it. Finally he heard the hunter say, "Of course I swear it! I would do so even if you did not hold my boy."

A moment later, Clabbus emerged from the shadows, sloshing toward the boats. Taian poled toward him, knelt and put her arms out; he was covered with waterweed and mud, but didn't bother to rinse himself. He clambered in quickly, embraced her, and turned as if it were an afterthought to Gorlen.

"We'll have you out soon," he said. "Thank you, Gorlen."

Gorlen started to raise his hand in acknowledgment, but saw as it broke water that the blackness had already receded halfway toward the first knuckle of his thumb. He was doing far too good a job.

"I'm grateful I can help," he said, keeping his hand down.

Clabbus tossed a looped rope to his coracle, drew it in and tied the two boats together; then he seized the pole and started moving away from the intersection, down the avenue that had brought them here. Taian stared back, white faced, as if she were in shock. "Be brave!" she said.

The rain was worsening. Gorlen wiped it from his eyes, left-handed, and blinked around him into the gloom, so poorly lit by swinging lamps. He waited for some one or all of the amphibians to move, to walk forward out of the shadows and seal the bargain. Instead, cold fingers clutched abruptly at his legs, his arms, his shoulders; swarming over him from all sides, they drew him under, giving him scarcely time to draw a breath. He should have known they moved faster underwater.

Thoughtfully, they brought him up for air every now and then, though never as often as he would have liked. He willed himself to relax, to let them

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drag him unresisting, to save his breath until he felt them rising, when he prepared to gasp as large a lungful as he could. The worst part of it was that gradually the liquid grew thicker and thicker, until they were dragging him through mud. It closed on his chest, as if he were being squeezed, and he could never quite breathe as deeply as he needed to. And then panic began to overtake him, so that he could no longer keep himself calm, but began lashing out and trying to hold himself above the surface for longer periods — though his struggling simply made it harder for him to get the air he needed.

Finally, they held him under far too long. His struggles mounted until, sparks exploding in his eyes, he began to lose consciousness. It was then that he felt rain on his face, washing the mud away, and he sucked in a desperate draft of air; and then another, and another. He opened his eyes and saw above him the intricately tangled silhouettes of plants. The phibs were towing him through water, among enormous looming trees. It was not only rain that washed him, but water pouring from the leafy canopy. Between breaks in the leaves he saw breaks in the clouds, and once again the night seemed luminous; at least, that is, until the swamp grew denser and closed in from above. He supposed they were wise not to keep him in the town; for all he knew, Clabbus's words might simply spur the hunters of Dankden to a genocidal frenzy, send them poling down en masse to the watery ghettos, descending on all the wet lairs they suspected of holding treacherous halfbreeds, to relieve them *all* of their hides.... Gorlen's life wouldn't be worth much as ransom at that point, nor Jezzle's.

Without warning, they dragged him under again. He went down sputtering, coughing up the bit of air he'd chanced to have in his lungs. This time they were definitely pulling him deep down; he didn't know how he could hold out. Then they shifted their grip on him, pushing him up, up into air — but this was a stifling atmosphere, clammy and oily, with a rotten edge that smelled as though the swamp were spoiling. He struck out with a hand and felt a muddy bank; they shoved him onto it. He lay there without moving, blinking to see if he could find any trace of clouds or stars — but the sky was black as a cave.

A cave, he thought. Close enough. This must be one of their dens.

He raised his hands to see if he could find a ceiling, but there was nothing. From the sloshing sounds and the hollowness of the voices around him, he knew he was in a closed chamber of some kind. He remembered what Taian

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had told him about never knowing what poisonous creatures might be inches away; remembered that the hunters did exactly this for their livings, and shivered. He was thoroughly chilled anyway. He wondered how well they knew the needs of humans, if they would allow him to get warm and dry somehow.

"Hello?" he ventured, to see if they would object to his questions. There was no reply, only further splashing. The voices had ceased. He held his breath and listened, but heard nothing more. They'd dropped him here and gone away.

Gorlen huddled for awhile on the wet bank, but as he grew colder, he decided that movement would be wiser. He went onto all fours, crawling away from the water, but had gone no more than a few feet when he bumped into a wall — a slimy mass of tightly tangled cords and cables textured like rubbery bark. He followed the wall until it led him back to water, within several body lengths. He could not imagine this was a true home — not even an amphibian's. Nor did it bode well for his comfort. He had to clench his jaws to keep his teeth from chattering.

Suddenly there was a bubbling sound, and a choking breath. Coughing. Splashing. Gorlen drew back to the wall, trying to see anything, but failing. He didn't need vision, though, to recognize a boy's curses.

"Jezzle?" The boy grew quiet. He could hear him paddling quietly, then dripping as he hauled himself onto the bank.

"Is...is that you? The bard?"

"Gorlen, yes." He moved toward the voice, put out his hand and felt the boy's face; he tightened his grip on Jezzle's shoulder.

"But how'd you get here?"

Quickly Gorlen told him what had happened since Jezzle's abduction. "They'll work something out," he promised. "I'm sure of it."

"Well, I'm not waiting around," Jezzle said. "If they think they can hold a hunter...."

"Jezzle, be calm, be patient. It's what your father and sister would want."

"My pa *hunts* phibs, he doesn't bargain with them! You can't trust the halfbreeds, you idiot, they're worst of all. We've gotta get out of here before they come back and kill us."

"I don't think that's what they had in mind. Why would they have left us here if they meant to kill us?"

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"Hell, nobody understands the phibs — they're stupid animals. You'll see what I mean when we swim out of here."

"Swim — where?"

"Down, out, and up. I do this all the time — swim into empty dens for practice, you see? This is nothing to me. Are you coming?"

"I — I can't let you do that. I gave my word."

"You can't stop me, can you?"

He didn't give Gorlen time to answer. He heard the boy hit the water. Gorlen pictured Taian's reaction when she learned that he had let her brother go alone into the swamp. Try explaining diplomacy to a rash youth....

Gorlen stood clumsily at the edge of the bank, filled his lungs with air, and dived. He felt relatively sure of the direction by which he'd entered the den — at least, he felt sure until he found himself swimming into thickets of submerged rootwood. He clung to the roots in order to keep himself from succumbing to his one true desire, which was to bob back to the surface of the enclosed pool and await the return of those who held his life in their webbed hands. Resisting the temptation of a passive captivity, he squeezed the air from his lungs and dragged himself deeper, going hand over hand, flesh over stone. His head began to throb. Between the roots were spaces wide enough to accommodate him. One of them was the passage the phibs had taken. He thrust blindly through one promising opening and stroked desperately toward the surface, face tipped up so that he could suck air the instant he surfaced. He was discouraged, to say the least, when he plowed full-face into a root cluster. Thinking to swim around it, he struck out for open water — but found only more thick wooden cables enclosing him. Gorlen saw clearly that he was encaged in the root mass. From the throbbing pressure of his sinuses, he estimated that the surface was ten feet above — it might as well have been ten leagues. He clawed at the roots, telling himself he would not panic. The water, black until now, began to fill with streaming lights. A distant liquid music swelled in his ears as though an operatic riverboat were passing overhead. This developed into a rich, throaty vibration, a catfish purr. According to those who had been revived from the edge of watery death, drowning was almost peaceful once you gave in and inhaled the waters, once the body surrendered and let the soul drift free. Gorlen clung to this last hope as he opened his mouth and inhaled —

Warm, fishy air.

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He nearly choked. Cold lips out of nowhere pressed tight to his own. Opening his eyes in disbelieving terror, he saw nothing. Nor could he move; something powerful bound his arms to his sides, albeit without hurting him. Reflexively he breathed in deep, then deeper still, unable to believe that there was air enough to fill him. There was a rich taste in his lungs, an undercurrent to the clammy essence, some perfume that flooded his brain and seeped down his nerves like a whisper, nudging him with secret knowledge, eking out revelation on such a fine level that he felt his atoms were conversing with a stranger's atoms. The mouth sealed to his own began a slight suction, encouraging his exhalation; he gave up the stale air gladly. On the second inhalation — shallower, less desperate — his blinded eyes lit up with a vision of the swamp, all its tangled waterways cast through him like a glowing net whose intricacies were as homey and familiar as the sound of his own pulse. He knew his location: near the sea, not far from Dankden. *Dankden! Human town!* At the thought of the place, he felt a violent urge to flee at any cost, to swim and keep swimming until he had put that loathsome blot far behind him. An evil paradox posed itself in the same instant: there was literally nowhere left to run. The swamps, once vast enough to remain uncharted even by their most ancient inhabitants, had dwindled alarmingly within the span of several generations; encroached on by human dwellings, drained and poisoned and tamed by air-breathers, the swamps had been reduced to a few last drops.

Fear and frustration filled Gorlen; he drank them in even as he withdrew from the verge of death. His heart rate slowed. He was sinking, dropping free of the root-clutches. He continued to breathe slowly, his savior somehow producing fresh air for him, none of it laced so powerfully with the visions of the first few breaths. His toes sank into bottom slime. His captor puffed him full of air, gently closed his lips to seal it in, then launched him up. He paddled weakly, limp but buoyant. Moments later he broke the surface, tasting wind and rain and a vast open night. He looked down but the black water betrayed nothing. Thinking of what was down there, and what might surprise him here, he called quietly, "Jezzle!"

The boy didn't answer in words; instead, after a moment, Gorlen felt a hand on his arm. Then came Jezzle's whisper: "Good, you came. Now we have to find our way toward the sea. From there we're home free."

"There's an open channel just there," Gorlen said. "If we can get into it, the tide will carry us out."

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"But the tide's still at peak," Jezzle said. "You can't even feel the swirl in here — and when it starts out, it just makes false eddies."

"Don't worry," Gorlen said, sensing the swamp around him like a living map. "I know what I'm doing."

"How could you know? You're a bard! Even my father's been betrayed by the suck."

Gorlen quelled a momentary impulse to share his experience with the boy. It was important to waste no time; but more than that, his rescue seemed sublime, magical. He did not think he could find the words for it...not yet.

"We can't stay where we are," he said. "You might as well have remained in the den, if you weren't willing to risk the tides."

The boy fell silent.

"If you don't want to follow me, fine," Gorlen said. "But I'm going now — toward the sea."

He began to swim in what he *knew* was the right direction, and Jezzle — without a stronger opinion — followed.

As he swam, he felt no fear of the waters around him. Everything seemed quite different since his entry into the swamps, when every shadow had threatened. He knew there were dangers here, but he also knew how to recognize them. The hardest thing of all was to keep heading toward the dark spot of treachery that ravenously fed on the edges of the swamp: the city of Dankden. In his heart, Gorlen wanted only to flee the place; but he owed the boy a safe journey home. He still had hopes of seeing Taian again, and of achieving some kind of reconciliation among the phibs and their hunters.

They moved into steadily wider channels, the trees ever thinner around them, until at last they emerged in a wide tidal flat, with open sea ahead of them, and juts of mist-hung rock standing up beyond the waves.

"I can't believe it," Jezzle said. "I know this place. How did you find it?"

"Gargoyles have a faultless sense of direction," he lied. "The curse carries with it a few advantages."

They followed the treeline, sometimes clambering over sandbars as the tide receded, but mainly keeping to the trees. Gorlen's sense of dread increased as they approached Dankden, which threw rays of sickly light out over the flats far ahead. It was a relief when he sighted a pure silvery glimmer some small distance into the swamp, among the trees, an image which made his heart sing with hope for reasons he did not fully understand, but which

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had something to do with the clammy breath of life he had received. "Look there!" he called to Jezzle, and started off into the swamp until he reached the object of so much joy. This was a cluster of silvery wet globes, piled among the knotty strands of a knuckleroot, barely visible as the moon peeked out from the slight gap between clouds and horizon.

"How — how did you spot these?" Jezzle said. Gorlen smiled inwardly at having impressed the boy with his superior knowledge of the swamps, although he did not yet understand exactly what he had found. Kneeling closer, he saw small swimmers inside each of the spheres. They seemed to sing to him in the silvery light.

He glanced over at Jezzle and saw that the boy was quietly, quickly stabbing the globes with his knife. He had already cut into dozens.

"Fertile ones, and perfectly ripe!" Jezzle said. "If I only had a net to drag them home right now!"

"What are you doing?" Gorlen seized the boy's elbow, but Jezzle tore away, confused.

"What do you mean? I'm fixing them. I'll come back tomorrow for the harvest, but I can't let them grow any larger, can I?"

"Why...why not?"

"They'll be ruined for curing, you idiot!"

"Curing?"

"What did you think they were for? I can't wait to see pa's face when I bring him here."

Gorlen remembered the leathery globes Taian had tossed on the smoking fires that afternoon, to give the hides their finish. He'd thought they were vegetables!

Jezzle began puncturing more of the spheres. Gorlen leapt on him from behind, pulled the boy back and flung him down in the mud.

"What's wrong with you?" Jezzle said, spitting with fury.

Gorlen didn't answer. He stared down at the swimming shapes trapped in the few undamaged globes remaining. A generation of pure phibs, massacred. Sickness filled him. He rounded on Jezzle, saw a greed much larger than one boy — and held his tongue.

"There's no time for this," he said in a deadened voice, seizing Jezzle by his elbow and dragging him to his feet. "It's more important to get you home safe to your father."

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"You're no hunter," Jezzle said.

"Give me your knife."

"What?"

Gorlen twisted Jezzle's wrist till the knife dropped. He stooped to pick it up, then knelt to press the tip against one of the spheres.

"Watch my hand," he said.

"Your hand — hey, the stone's nearly gone. What happened?"

"It comes and goes. Now watch and you'll see why I'm no hunter. Why I cannot kill."

The knife blade quivered, sending ripples across the wet spherical surface. The small shape inside stirred and seemed to move toward the point, as if it were a parent. Gorlen waited; he pressed slightly, and waited again. Waited for the advance of stone, but felt nothing. Pressed harder, till thick clear liquid began to spill down the blade toward his fingers — fingers that steadfastly *refused* to turn to stone.

He yanked the knife away, hoping it was not too late. "I don't understand," he said. The egg continued to leak.

"Give me that," Jezzle said, snatching at the knife. He then buried it in the egg and pulled it out again. The swimmer was dead. "You only wounded it, Gorlen. At least be quick."

Gorlen stared at his hand, the black tip that refused to claim more of his finger. "You wretched rock," he whispered. "You gargoyle conscience!"

"You're right, though," Jezzle said. "We should get back; these'll keep overnight."

This time it was Jezzle who dragged Gorlen to his feet.

"Are you okay? You look sick."

"I'll be all right," Gorlen said.

"I said it before: You're no hunter."

THE MOON dipped below the horizon, consigning them once more to darkness by the time they had reached Dankden from the seaward side. At low tide, Dankden looked like a different town completely. The streets were draining toward the ocean and the swamps; lower tiers of stepping stones and even muddy cobbles were revealed; fish flopped and eels curled in accidental pools. The stilts beneath most buildings were thickly furred with brown and

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green weeds; clusters of gold bulbs dangled from the pilings; barnacles hugged up tight inside their conical shells, though it did them little good when the harvesters came at them with hammers and tongs. All this was lit — in addition to the lamps — by a leaping orange light that played upon the low clouds, outlining the rooftops, coming from some distant part of town. It was with a sinking sense of failure that Gorlen recognized the tossing glow. He had seen more than one city in flames.

"That's coming from the phibby slums," Jezzle said as they sloshed along. "I knew my pa wouldn't let them off."

"It couldn't have been Clabbus," Gorlen assured him. "He has enemies, you know."

"Hunters stick together! Yeeaah!" Jezzle broke off running toward the center of the conflagration.

Alone, Gorlen moved more slowly, like one doomed. If there was anything he had learned in this life, it was when to leave. He would claim his eduldamer, purchase a new pair of boots, and set out. Perhaps a farewell kiss to Taian, more likely not. Even she — lovely, sensitive girl — tossed living phib eggs on the fire and wondered why each year the swamps held fewer phibs. Nothing he did here would matter in the least. He had not managed even to play the part of a hostage.

There were plenty of folk in the streets; they seemed more merry than concerned, as if the fire were the main event at a festival. The tide would return, and it was starting to rain again. They, at least, were safe.

He asked the way to Clabbus's house, and eventually found a man who knew the hunter. When he pounded on the outer door, the landlord recognized him from earlier in the evening, and let him in to find his way up the dark stairs which he now knew he would never climb often enough to master.

In Clabbus's apartment, the smoke-stench of curing hides repulsed him, but he pushed through them in search of his belongings, which he had left near the fireplace. As he straightened, his bags slung over his shoulder, his heart jumped with surprise.

Taian stood in the doorway. She was wrapped in her phib hide, pale face streaked with mud. She seemed shocked to see him.

"I — I've brought your brother back," he said.

"Something horrible has happened!"

"I guessed as much. But Jezzle's safe. I think he went to find your father."

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Moving like a woman carved of knucklewood, Taian crossed the room and sank down in Clabbus's chair before the coals.

"We went to the Phibby Inn," she said. "It was a riot there. Everyone believed the phibs had murdered my father. They were gathering to descend on the halfbreeds, to destroy them in their slums. When we appeared, it should have stopped them; they should have seen how they'd been lied to. But...it didn't even matter. They didn't want the truth. They wanted to do what they'd been set on all along. We couldn't turn them aside. They didn't even care that you and Jezzle might be out there."

Gorlen sank down next to her. He put his right hand on her neck, barely noticing that even his fingers were flesh now, flesh almost down to their glossy black tips.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"I — I came back for some things," she said. "Then I'm leaving."

"I understand. Where will you go?"

She shook her head. "I can't stay here, that's all I know. Father can live with them or fight them as he wishes. He can take care of Jezzle, in any case. The boy wants nothing but to hunt." She turned to Gorlen, her eyes wet. "They murdered halfbreeds in their homes, unless they were fast enough to flee to the swamps. But they're not full phibs, Gorlen! They're dependent on Dankden. They can't survive out in the swamps, not for long, not anymore. Even calling them halfbreeds is unfair. They're people. People like us!"

He pushed back her hood and stroked her hair, at last feeling the warmth in his fingers, flexing them in amazement. If he could only hold onto this feeling forever, the knowledge that he was doing the right thing, no matter how hard (although at this moment it felt so easy)....

"It's all right," he said.

She hid her face in her hands. "I saw — I saw a mother and her hatchlings — I mean, her children. She was so afraid that she was tearing them prematurely from their eggs, giving them the breath of life, and pushing them into the canal, hoping some few of them might swim to freedom. I saw them struggle and choke; they floated past while I stood there, unable to save a one of them."

"The breath...of life?" he said.

She looked at him, as if noticing him for the first time. "Phibs, even halfbreeds, are born underwater," she said. "They take their first breath from

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their mother, who carries fresh air just for them, enough to get them to the surface. But these were too young...undeveloped lungs..."

"Good Goddess," Gorlen whispered. He could taste the fishy life-giving air again, the breath that had saved him in the root cage, and imbued him with an inner, living map of the swamp. Closing his eyes, he could sense the swamp so near...could sense also where it once had been in its primordial state, claiming the very soil where Clabbus's home now stood. He carried the swamp inside him, as if some compass needle had been activated in his head. The phibs must have had some homing instinct, a gift from their mothers — would have it even once their home had been destroyed. And now it was his as well, to the limited extent his humanity allowed. Wherever he went, he would feel the swamp somewhere behind him, dying, doomed, crying out...until it was silenced. And even then, he would hear its murdered ghost weeping.

He opened his eyes when he felt Taian lean against him. She was sobbing. His preternaturally sensitive fingers moved in her hair, feeling every strand. She was cold, and his first impulse was to warm her, but he was colder still, and wet from the swamps. They moved together, closer to the glowing coals.

"I must leave," she said in his ear. "Before my father returns. I must go now, before I lose my determination."

"Yes," he said, but his heart was quickening, and he sensed that hers was too. "I'll go with you. I know the roads."

"No," she said. "I must go alone. It's the only way."

His hands, both warm, began to rove.

"Please, Gorlen. I — I can't wait. I can't take the time."

Gorlen bit back words. He wanted to stroke her, to feel her nakedness beneath her cloak. He wanted the warmth between them to build to a fire; he wanted the time to spend with her, but there was none.

"Please," she said, but he couldn't bear to let her go. He reached for her as she spun away; reached, knowing that if he could grab her wrist, she would not resist him. Reached —

And felt his hand turn to stone.

"Ohhhh...."

It was a weary, drawn-out groan. From across the room, having easily eluded a hand that could not grasp, Taian looked back with concern. "What is it? Gorlen, you understand, don't you?"

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"Of course," he said, pulling black stone fingers back into his sodden sleeve, hiding his affliction. "It's nothing. Go, now. I'll explain to your father as best I can. It's your choice. He'll understand, Taian."

She hesitated.

"Go on," he said. "Quick! While you're determined!"

Taian smiled, blew him a kiss, and then he heard her on the stairs. He jumped to his feet and ran down the hall to the outer balcony. He watched her walk out onto the street, anonymous in her dark cloak of phib hide, in the rain, clutching a traveling sack. Low-tide was short-lived; already the streets were awash.

"Good luck, Taian," he said quietly. "May we meet again, when we both have the time."

A cold gust kept carrying rain over the balcony, but he was already as wet as it was possible to get. He looked at the dried globes stacked by the smoker, and shivered in his soggy cloak of common cloth. Common cloth, yes, but from that moment forward he would never wish for anything finer.

He drew back his damp sleeve and raised his right hand. Obdurate, stony, inky adamant fixed in the act of grasping.

"You fool," he said, as if it were something apart from himself.

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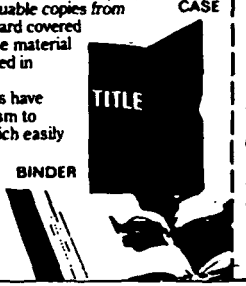

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F&SF COMPETITION

REPORT ON COMPETITION 64

In Competition 64, we asked you to submit a rejection letter of up to 100 words for any well known SF or fantasy work. The point was to make the rejection humorous, either in its misunderstanding of the manuscript or in the wit of the response. Having written too few witty rejections, and too many based on our own obtuseness, we found ourselves enjoying the satire (sometimes of our own technique). We give special awards to all those entrants who found *Dune* too dry and in need of additional spice, as well as those courageous folks who took on the Bible for its inconsistencies and long list of begats. For the best of the rejects, please see below:

FIRST PLACE

RICHARD MATHESON —

X — This day when it had light editor called me a first reader. You first reader she said. I wonder what it is a first reader.

In my desk place with cold walls all around I have paper things publisher says is slush. He chained me tight. He made me read BORNOFMANANDWOMAN.

XX — I am not so glad. All day it is slush in here. And I have bad anger with editor and publisher.

If they try to make me read your stories again Ill hurt them. I will.

R. —

— James Williamson
Omaha, NE

SECOND PLACE

Dear Mr. Stephen King:
As regards your recent submission of the epic, epic-length novel *The Stand*, you may take this as a lesson in literary technique. No.
Sincerely,
Short Attention Span Publishing

— Lesa Neace
Whitesburg, KY

•

THE ROBERT HEINLEIN RUNNERS UP

Dear Mr. Heinlein,
We have received your manuscript, *Door Into Summer*, but it seems that you sent us two revisions of the first half of the same document. As you may expect, the results were circular and confusing. When you figure out the problem, please resubmit.

— Charles Emmons
Brookfield, CT

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Dear Mr. Heinlein:
We like your novel, *Wednesday*, and we think it could sell well with one small change. We find that the pulp paperback-buying public has a more positive association with some other days of the week. Might we suggest *Saturday* as an alternative title?

— **Chris Niswander**
Oracle, AZ

Dear Mr. Heinlein:
We are returning your ms. of *The Puppet Masters*. No strings attached.

— **Tessa B. Dick**
Fullerton, CA

THE NON-HEINLEIN RUNNERS-UP

Dear Mr. Linebarger/"Cordwainer Smith,"
We are returning your novel, *Nostrilia*, unread. If, in future, you choose to write about a single body part, we suggest you choose one with broader appeal.

The Editors

— **Gail Sosinsky Wickman**
Altoona, WI

Dear Ms. Willis,
Thank you for sending us your story, "Even the Queen." Even though I was experiencing a bad bout of PMS when I read it, I did circulate it to several other editors here. The general agreement is that although many of our readers would like the story, we have to decline. Some of our major advertisers, including Kimberly-Clark and Midol, would not take kindly to the ideas you have expressed. We wish you the very best of luck in placing your material in a magazine which does not have to deal with monthly hormonal imbalances as we do. So you know where to go...

The Editorial Staff
One of the seven sisters magazines

— **Carol Silverman Saunders**
Livingston, NJ

HONORABLE MENTIONS

"I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream," by Harlan Ellison: We do, and feel the same way.

— **Gordon Schnaper**
Tewksbury, MA

Jules Verne, *Around the World in Eighty Days*: Too racy.

— **Carol D. Pinchefsky**
Philadelphia, PA

The Time Machine, by H. G. Wells: Hopelessly dated.

— **Scott Morgan**
Broomall, PA

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COMPETITION 65 (Suggested by Harlan Ellison)

INDENTURED BLURBITUDE: in which the competitor is required to put him/herself in the position of a professional sf/fantasy/horror author who has been sent a Xerox copy of a manuscript, or bound galleys of said manuscript, or page proofs of said manuscript, written by a long-time friend, sent by the enthusiastic publisher for a cover blurb in praise of said manuscript...and the book is awful.

Your mission (if you choose to accept, Mr. Phelps) is to dissemble outrageously. You cannot opt out, you cannot say it stinks on ice, you cannot risk losing the lifelong friendship of a brother or sister author who has gone into the dumper on this one. You must blurb or commit hara-kiri.

A real book familiar to the general audience may be used at your own peril.

A classic example: A few years ago a very famous fantasy novelist (who shall go nameless for the sake of *our* friendship) was pressed to write a blurb for a much-ballyhooed novel about to be released. He hated it. But he wrote "This book is as good, as readable, as Tolkien!" which was fine, as far as the world knew; but he saved face with his friends, because we all knew that he *loathed* Tolkien's work and thought it unreadable.

— Harlan Ellison

For Competition 65, we ask you to submit a short blurb of no more than 100 words for any well known SF, fantasy, or horror work, following the rules above.

RULES: Send entries to Competition Editor, *F&SF*, 143 Cream Hill Road, W. Cornwall, CT 06796. Entries must be received by Nov. 15. Judges are the editors of *F&SF*; their decision is final. All entries become the property of *F&SF*; none can be returned.

PRIZES: First prize, eight different hardcover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different SF paperbacks. Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to *F&SF*. Results of Competition 65 will appear in the March issue.

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SHORT STORY CONTEST. 34th annual National Fantasy Fan Federation amateur science fiction and fantasy short story contest. $100 in prizes. Send SASE for rules and entry blanks to Donald Franson, 6543 Babcock Ave., North Hollywood, CA 91606-2308. Mention F&SF.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

Now that we've let you see the deep, dark secrets of editing (and if you missed them, look at the introduction to Harlan Ellison's story in this issue), you must realize that we are always plotting, scheming and conniving—all for your enjoyment, of course. No sooner have we put the October/November issue "to bed" (don't ask us to explain *that* publishing term), than we find ourselves looking ahead to December.

And we have quite a December planned for you.

We start with a science fiction story by **Robert Reed** that we think about each time we sit at our computers. Called "The Myrtle Man," the story is about Jacob Turnbull, who specializes in "myrtle" problems. And what are myrtle problems? Why, they're sophisticated computer problems, a virus or series of viruses that attack a library and create beautiful elaborate...lies. And sometimes, people would prefer lies to the truth....

Ian MacLeod contributes the contemporary fantasy story to the issue. In "Nina-with-the-Sky-in-Her-Hair," a salesman approaches a very rich man—a rich man who is very insecure about his relationship with his wife—and offers him the sky. When the man laughs and says owning the sky is impossible, the salesman reaches into his pocket. "I have a sample," he says. And so it begins, a cautionary tale about love, and greed, and blue skies.

Our cover story might be a horror story or it might be a fantasy, but it's unlike anything we've ever seen before. **Jill Bauman** did the illustration from "The Happy Hunting Ground." To describe the novella is to ruin its delicacy, but suffice to say it's set on the Great Plains in the last half of the previous century. The author, **R. Garcia y Robertson**, used to teach history—and he makes the past come alive, along with its hopes, its dreams, and its fears. This one is a do-not-miss treat, and an excellent way to end the year.

Also in December, we'll have the usual columns along with a new one. **Janet Asimov** has kindly consented to assist with our science columns.

And the scheming doesn't end here. We're looking ahead to 1996, and we see stories from **Ray Bradbury, Ben Bova,** and **George Alec Effinger. Nina Kiriki Hoffman**, and **Michael Coney** contribute cover stories. **Jerry Oltion** will show us the empirical difference between science fiction and fantasy, and **Ron Goulart** will show us a cure for baldness. So mind those renewal notices, and keep your subscription current.

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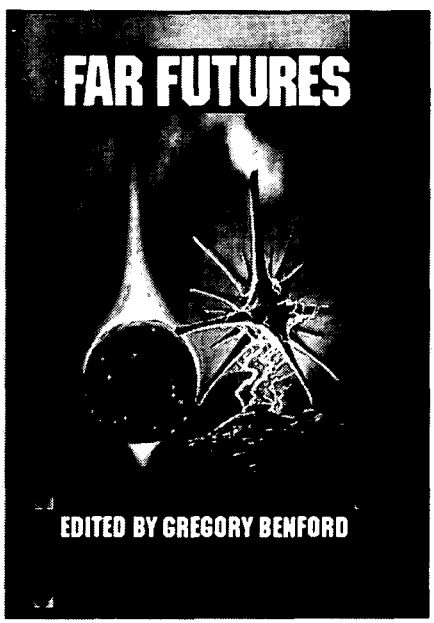
Ten thousand years in the future...

Five new short novels of hard science fiction — by five masters of the form



Gregory Benford, one of the great SF writers of our day, has assembled an ambitious hard science fiction anthology. This collection of five original novellas by Poul Anderson, Charles Sheffield, Joe Haldeman, Greg Bear and Donald M. Kingsbury, takes the *very* long perspective—all are set at least ten thousand years from now.

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Finally! SF for short attention spans! Hilarious competitions and cartoons from F&SF

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❀ Fads of the future: Shaved household pets, celebrity food fights, having your very own personal nuclear device.

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❀ Sequels: *Candygram for Algernon, The Sheep Look Down.*

❀ Misprints caused by addition of one letter: *Whom; The Man Who Loved Mares*, and, of course, ***OI, ROBOT***, which is the title of the long awaited book collection of more than 50 of these startling items, including bawdy limericks, Feghoots, worst story openings, 50-Word Mini Sagas and more.

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A newsstand edition is on sale Sept 28. This offer is for a limited edition, printed on quality paper and signed by the editor. 176 pages. Only $9.95.

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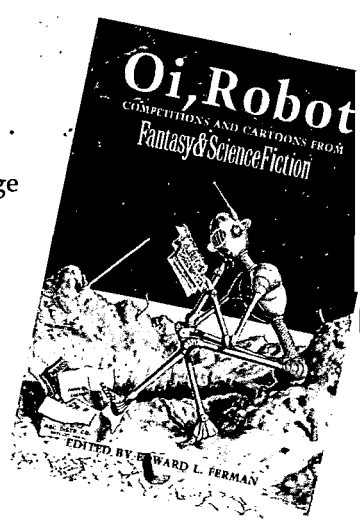

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